Waving and Drowning: UK Trans Youth Experiences of Social Media Affective Publics

Drew Simms

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

Sheffield Hallam University

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2025

Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree.

2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

3. I certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy, and ethics approval has been granted for all research studies in the thesis.

5. The word count of the thesis is 79,238

Name	Drew Simms
Date	June 2025
Award Type	PhD
Research Institute	Department of Education
Director of Studies	Dr Tig Slater

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sheffield Hallam for granting me the GTA scholarship that made this possible and provided me with valuable teaching experience. I feel privileged to have had such warm and generous supervision from Dr Tig Slater, Professor El Formby and Dr Chris Bailey, who did so much to provide me with opportunities and make me feel like I deserve to be here. I could not have even begun this work without the unending patience and support of my partner, George. Others who got me to the start line include Emma, Tilly, Nathan, Billie and Kaye. The bulk of this thesis was written beside my regular coworking peers, Kirk and Becky; with honourable mentions to Ben, Otto, Hector, Annie, Charlotte, Daniel, Kayden, Talya and Steph. My fellow trans PhD colleagues: Ge, Sylvia, Mars and Kirk again; when I doubted myself, my belief in us together was enough. My family kept me grounded by being generally proud, whilst not quite understanding what it is that I do. The time I've spent in Peak Queer Adventures has provided me with an insight into what community can actually be, thanks to more people than I can reasonably name (let's say Sims et al.), and this has undoubtably influenced my academic thinking. My trans siblings everywhere, especially the sad and the mad ones, are my reason for everything. We are so different, and we are the same. I love you.

And finally, my cat Chip, for reminding me you don't need to be smart to be worthy.

For EF, I still send you DMs.

Abstract

Trans youth and their relationship to social media have been under increasing scrutiny in the UK, with social contagion fears influencing government-issued school guidance, and calls for bans on social media for under-16s in the wake of transphobic violence. In this context, trans youth are frequently discussed but rarely listened to. This project sought to address this by asking UK-based trans youth about their attitudes, experiences and feelings regarding their social media use, as well as what the qualities of an ideal social media would be. Data was collected by holding asynchronous online focus groups with 17 self-identified trans youth aged 17-24 between February and August 2023. Thematic analysis of the data resulted in 5 data chapters grouped into topics of: building identity and community, visibility traps and doors, negative vortextuality, transphobia, and imagined futures. Using a framework based in trans existentialism, queer, feminist and trans affect theory, intimate publics and a sociology of algorithms, narratives emerged of complex and ambivalent negotiations of treacherous and precious personal online environments. Results support a range of existing research on: the positive role of social media for identity work, possibility modelling and emotional support, the high exposure to transphobia online, and the desire for platforms designed with affordances that consider the needs of trans people over profit. Novel contributions to knowledge include insights into maintaining networks across multiple platforms, privacy and safety anxieties, algorithmic and human-coproduced harms, embattlement, and intimacy labour. Plus, new formulations of commitment to t4t counterintimacy and cycles of negative vortextuality and doomscrolling, utilising depressed trans reading to affirm the liveability of trans lives that contain a great deal of day-to-day negativity. These findings have implications for stakeholders that include education around ways to maximise well-being and safety for trans youth on social media without compromising their agency.

Notes on terms used

Due to cisnormative[1] logics in most fields, any writing on trans people must begin with a note on terminology. As Robinson (2022, p.427) notes: "Notably, for most audiences, if I use the terms man or woman, I do not have to define them, but as soon as I say trans man or trans woman, I do." Whose identities must be defined and explained, and those that do not, tell us about the relative marginality of those subjects in dominant logic. Unlike Robinson (2022), I will not partake in "queer refusal" by not defining terms and concepts that are common to trans life, but I encourage the reader to consider the space and labour represented by this capitulation to requirements of cisnormative knowledge production.

Trans

Throughout this work the term **transgender (trans)** is used as an umbrella term to encompass anyone whose gender differs from the one assigned at birth, whether they are men, women, non-binary, agender, genderqueer etc. This is consistent with the way trans theorists and activists have used the term since the 1990s (Stryker, 2017, Feinberg, 2013). Where specific gender identities are relevant, they will be specified, and always in terms of the subject's self-identification (ID) (Goldberg & Beemyn, 2021).

Transfem[2] will be used when referring to trans people assigned male at birth, encompassing trans women and fem-leaning/identifying people of other genders. It will be necessary to use this term when discussing issues specific to this demographic, such as transmisogyny, i.e. the hatred of transfemininity (Serano, 2007). Likewise, **transmasc** will be used to refer to trans people assigned female at birth, encompassing trans men and masc-leaning/identifying people of other genders, when discussing transmasc-specific issues or research. The above is not a binary and does not encompass all trans people; it is merely a tool for discussing certain common experiences of two large sections of the community.

Transition refers to the physical and/or social act of moving from living as the gender assigned at birth to one's experienced gender. This can be broken down further into

[1] Explained under Cis.
[2] Fem rather than femme to acknowledge the existence of transfem butches.

social transition: “coming out”, name and pronoun change, clothing change, etc., and **medical transition**: hormone treatments, gender-affirming surgeries, etc. This distinction will be of importance in the discussion of discourse around the boundaries of transness.

The meaning of community in any context is contentious as it has shifted from only describing people who interact in a shared location to networks of post-place connections (Bradshaw, 2008). As will become clear, trans people are not homogeneous, and it is questionable how much **The Trans Community** can be said to exist as a cohesive group when trans people are so diverse and dispersed. However, within the logics of trans existentialism (Haulotte, 2023), as will be elucidated in the framework section, trans people are all united by common alienation from cisgender society, which is the basis from which the trans community is defined in what follows.

Cis

Cisgender (cis) is used to describe people who are not trans, i.e., their gender matches the one assigned at birth. This is not to imply that all cis people have uncomplicated relationships to gender; rather, it is a broad simplification for definitional purposes. **Cisnormativity** refers to the implied or overt assumption that being cis is “natural and normal” (Robinson, 2022), whereas **cis-supremacy** refers to an implied or overt belief that everyone *should* be cis, and those who are not are inferior (Horton, 2024).

The terms transphobic, trans-antagonism, trans-hostile and anti-trans are used interchangeably to describe actions (and people) actively asserting cis-supremacy.

AFK

In Glitch Feminism, Russell (2020) reinvigorates a term from the period when instant messaging was tied to a stationary computer: away from keyboard (AFK). She presents Nathan Jurgenson’s (2011) argument that this term serves as a more accurate way to describe instances when one is not actively engaging with digital content than the more commonly used “in real life” (IRL); digital life now being a very real part of most people’s lives. It is also debatable how much one can ever really be “offline”, even when not engaging with our online representations, avatars of ourselves continue to exist while we are AFK e.g. our social media profiles.

Russell develops this idea in the context of trans lives. When so many trans people turn to the internet for identity work, possibilities of presentation, and advice about medical transition, the physical trans body is impossible to disentangle from digital trans lives. For a group who struggle to be viewed as authentic, it would be an insult to needlessly apply unreality to such a vital aspect of trans lives. For these reasons, I will use the term AFK when discussing non-digital activity as opposed to "offline" or "in real life".

Affordances

Any discussion of social media requires mention of the affordances of the technology, but the definition of affordances has been historically difficult to clarify. Ronzhyn et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of affordances literature and proposed the following definition: "*Social media affordances are* the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms." (Ronzlyn et al. 2023, p.3178). This is the definition that will be used in this study due to its accounting for the broad co-construction of affordance between human and machine.

Youth

The definition of "youth" is contentious in general, but it is particularly troubled by transness due to experiences such as secondary or delayed puberties, periods of youth that are interrupted, "started over" or prolonged. Pearce (2018) and Malatino (2022) refer to this as Trans Time, (building on Halberstam's (2005) concept of Queer Time; the way in which queer people produce "alternative temporalities" to the heteronormative timeline of a life i.e. "birth, marriage, reproduction, and death"). As a result of Trans Time, it is difficult to put a boundary on trans youth as a demographic or to say with any confidence that trans young people have distinctly different experiences of social media, and little literature on the topic currently exists. The ages of "youth" in the literature reviewed in this thesis range from 6 to 30 years, but the most common lower age is 14, and the typical upper boundary is 22-26. For recruitment in this study, youth was defined as 14-24.

Twitter/X

During the period this study took place, the social media platform Twitter was acquired by Elon Musk and renamed X. When discussing research that happened before this change, I will use “Twitter (now X)”. I will also use “Twitter” when it is a direct quote from a participant, as none of them identified it as “X”. I will use “X (formerly Twitter)” when discussing the platform in the present.

1. Introduction

Trans issues, from the use of public bathrooms through to the very existence of trans subjecthood, have become increasingly central to the escalating culture war in the UK (Duffy et al. 2021). Trans youth are a key, hypervisible vector in this discourse facing ever more interventions on their autonomy to transition medically and socially. Social media use by young people has been accused of contributing to the "social contagion" of transness as a part of this denial of autonomy and self-knowledge. In all of this, trans youth rarely have their voices platformed or listened to as stakeholders in their own lives.

In addition to this background context for UK trans youth, research consistently shows that social support networks are a significant protective factor for trans youth against the negative impact of enacted stigma and marginalisation (Johns et al. 2018, Tankersley et al. 2021). Social media platforms provide opportunities for fostering such support networks, as trans people are a demographic who are relatively small and geographically dispersed (Whittle, 1998). However, research has also shown that trans people are very likely to be negatively affected by transphobic harassment and antagonism online (Bradley, 2020), making social media both a necessary lifeline and a potential source of harm. Whilst private groups (such as the type used in this study) are always an option to minimise risk of malicious communication, previous studies have also recognised the need for a certain amount of publicness in order to take part in activism (Jackson et al. 2018; Tortajada et al. 2021) and fundraising (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018), meaning that private social media is not without its downsides.

As very little existing research regarding trans social media experience addresses UK trans youth specifically, the aim of this study was to explore the range of experiences UK-based trans youth have using social media and what strategies they use to negotiate it.

This study utilises a framework based in trans existentialism, combining queer and trans affect theory with concepts of affective publics, counterintimacies and human-machine coproduction. Digital methods were used to recruit and hold asynchronous online focus groups (AOFGs) with 17 UK-based trans youth aged 17-24, in which participants discussed their social media experiences starting from prompts related to the research

questions. The resulting data was thematically analysed and grouped into chapters, where the themes are discussed.

It is always good practice for researchers to exercise ongoing self-reflection, but as a trans person who uses social media, the proximity of the author to the subject matter meant this felt of particular importance to demonstrate. As a result, in addition to a biographical reflection in the Methodology chapter, there is a netnographic reflection between data chapters 4 & 5, applying findings from the data to the author's experience of social media during a period of intense emotional vulnerability.

Data Chapter 1 gathers themes under the topics of building identity and community, in which the data most closely replicates existing research on the importance of social media for identity work, agentic learning and emotional support, as well as the ambivalence of community support and conflict. The theme of ambivalence crosses data chapters, and in Data Chapter 2 is present in the topics of visibility traps and doors experienced on social media. This is also supported by existing writing on the risks of hypervisibility without protection, as long experienced by trans women, and the benefits and limits of being able to see possibilities for trans lives.

Arguably, the richest themes for original contributions to knowledge are found in Data Chapter 3, which includes a proposed model for a cycle of negative vortextuality in social media engagement. This emerges from data relating to algorithmic forces and counterintimacy attachments experienced by participants as pulling them into digital deluges of negativity. Where Data Chapter 3 addresses ubiquitous but diffused trans negativity, Data Chapter 4 gathers themes of direct transphobia, that is, hostility, abuse and harassment participants reported experiencing due to their trans status. This ranged from one-off incidents to networked and semi-automated harassment campaigns lasting many days. In both Data Chapters 3 & 4, participants show a great deal of insight into the challenges they face online and describe the ways in which they actively attempt to mitigate harm to themselves and others. Such insight and lived expertise come to bear in Data Chapter 5, which examines the ideal futures participants imagined for social media. This addresses both modest hopes for being treated with compassion by others and ambitious ideas for technological restructuring of how platforms function.

Conclusions centre on the ambivalent and nuanced relationship trans youth have with their social media experience as it emerged from the data. Social media is an important source of learning and support with the benefit of customisable privacy, at the same time, ubiquitous anti-trans hostility commonly leads to an embattled and paranoid orientation. A sense of responsibility to t4t care via trans counterintimacies keeps trans youth engaged in online environments of negativity and risk, as well as being a source of kinship and possibility. It is the simultaneous struggle to keep above water in endless currents, downpours and vortexes of crises whilst engaging in learning, care and other work of recognition that leads to the title of this thesis, a narrative of trans youth both waving and drowning.

These conclusions have many implications for stakeholders, from community organisations facilitating social media literacy through education, through to social media companies creating better structured platforms to reduce the tendency towards negative vortextuality. There are implications for future research to develop evidence on areas such as cycles of doomscrolling vortextuality, but also to fill gaps left by the lack of younger, rural and racialised trans youth in the dataset.

1.1 Research Questions

Four research questions evolved over the duration of this project; a factor that has remained constant is the breadth of scope.

1. How do UK trans youth conceive of and experience the affordances of the social media they use?

In aiming to do justice to the voices of the participants (the lack of trans youth voices in current discourse being a motivating factor in conducting this study initially), broad research questions about their experiences were utilised to allow for the data to be led by the participants' conceptualisations and priorities regarding the topic.

2. What is the affective experience of being a trans young person on social media in the UK?

Before data collection, the theory framework underlying the project was primarily a political and discursive one, focusing on publics and counterpublics. However, as data began to emerge, it became clear that affect was a core component of the participants'

narratives, leading to a refocusing of the framework and a research question around affect.

3. How do UK trans youth negotiate the costs and risks of social media, and what do they wish was different?

A research question about participants' insights, tactics and solutions, both current and hypothetical, takes the approach of respecting participants' knowledge and skills as a component of doing justice to their voices. It also creates the potential for this knowledge to be amplified and disseminated back into the community as a part of positive research impact.

4. How do intersections of gender, sexuality, race, disability etc. relate to the above?

To avoid the pitfall of reductionism when the research focus is one common demographic, a research question that acknowledges the complex interplay of identities allows for the nuanced discussion of data that is not directly trans-related.

2. Background

2.1 UK context for trans people

In the anglosphere, 2014 is generally pointed to as the year trans visibility went mainstream, with Time magazine announcing the "transgender tipping point" in a cover story featuring Laverne Cox, a Black trans woman and star of the Netflix show Orange is the New Black. As Gossett et al. (2017) and others have outlined, this growing attention to trans people, and particularly the hypervisibility of transfems, has no inherent liberatory effect, and without a growth in protections to match the growth in attention, puts trans people at greater risk of discrimination and violence.

An example of the fraught nature of this increase in attention is the take up of trans issues in the ever-escalating "culture war" both internationally and in the UK. Specific to the UK, Duffy et al. (2021) mark the Brexit vote in 2016 as a point of dramatic expansion of culture war topics and coverage in the press, with issues of trans rights joining topics of race, empire, free speech, political culture, national identity, etc. The catalyst for the growing presence of trans issues in the UK culture war is often claimed to be the government's proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) starting in 2018 (Hines, 2020; Duffy et al., 2021).

The reform that trans activist groups were campaigning for regarding the GRA would have made it easier for trans people to be issued new birth certificates featuring their updated name and gender, doing away with the long and expensive process of evidencing their gender to a panel of "experts" for approval. To explain the backlash to this proposed reform and all other trans-inclusive initiatives, it is necessary to detail the specific context of UK trans-antagonism (Pearce et al. 2020).

The UK is a locus of what is known as "trans-exclusionary radical feminism" (TERF), which is based in the belief that trans women are men who pose a threat to cis women, especially in single-sex spaces (Pearce et al., 2020). Whereas trans men, assigned-female-at-birth nonbinary people, and (some) trans youth are believed to be vulnerable victims of a "transgender craze" spread via social contagion (Ashley, 2020; Fonseca, 2021; Wiggins, 2021). This leads to anti-trans arguments that claim to be based in a concern for "the safety of women and girls", i.e. safety from predatory trans women and safety from being tricked into becoming trans themselves. Thus, the backlash to the

proposed GRA reform is based on the argument that it would allow "men" to enter women's spaces via self-ID[3].

This "feminist" approach to anti-trans beliefs (or "gender critical" as they often self-describe at the time of writing), differs from the transphobia that is a part of a wider queerphobia of the far-right, in that it is represented across a spectrum of political leanings and has garnered an air of respectability in mainstream discourse[4] (Lamble, 2024). In the UK, this has been aided by several court cases in which gender-critical beliefs have been found to be protected under the Equality Act 2010 (e.g. Siddique, 2021). This is despite prominent gender-critical writers such as Helen Joyce expressing cis-supremacist, sanist sentiments such as "every one of those [trans] people is basically, you know, a huge problem to a sane world." (Kelleher, 2022).

As the culture war has intensified in the UK public sphere, trans (fem's) access to toilets, changing rooms, sports, domestic violence services etc. have become framed as legitimate topics of debate. This is evidenced by political discourse (RESIST, 2024), ever-increasing coverage in the national press (Baker, 2019) and the recent Supreme Court ruling that trans women are not women with regards to the Equality Act 2010 (Carrell, 2025).

Whilst the UK by no means has the sole claim to trans hostility, UK anti-trans activism is particularly vocal and successful at exporting its ideology; this can be seen in the initial result of Bell V. Tavistock (2020) being cited by anti-trans politicians in the US and elsewhere, e.g. in Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's order that affirming care for trans youth be treated as child abuse by the Department of Family and Protective Services in February 2022 (Ghorayshi, 2022). As a result of the success and spread of UK-based anti-trans rhetoric based on a concern for "the safety of women and girls", the UK now has an international reputation as "TERF Island" (Lewis and Seresin, 2022; Lewis, 2024).

[3] That people already use self-ID for women's spaces as no one is required to present their birth certificate on entering, for example, a changing room, is ignored by this argument.

[4] However, in the pursuit of a trans-hostile agenda many of these self-described feminist organisations have been found to cooperate and organise with far-right groups who oppose core feminist values such as reproductive rights and gender equality (Links & Moore, 2022, Butler, 2024).

2.2 UK context for trans youth

Anti-trans activism in the UK has intensified its focus on trans young people in recent years, and trans youth have increasingly become the focus of public discourse. This can be seen in examples such as a press analysis which found that between 2012 and 2019, the number of UK press articles about trans people increased by 3.5 times, in which mentions of trans youth increased by 23 times (Baker, 2019). Whilst all aspects of trans youths' lives have come under increasing scrutiny, down to their very existence (e.g. Rowling, 2024; Horton, 2024), the primary areas of political and media focus can be summarised as: healthcare, education, violence and suicide.

2.2.1 Healthcare

Puberty blocker ban

In 2019, Keira Bell took legal action against the only NHS gender clinic for under-18s in the UK, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, claiming she was too young to consent to the gender-affirming treatment she received before she detransitioned. In 2020, the initial result of Bell v Tavistock ruled in Bell's favour, which led to a suspension in the prescription of puberty blockers to under-16s until the ruling was overturned at appeal in 2021 (Wakefield, 2022). This was the context at the time data was collected for this project.

Since then, the government-commissioned Cass Report into healthcare for trans youth was published in 2024. Medical bodies around the world have widely criticised it for ignoring most existing quality evidence and including questionable evidence with an anti-trans bias (Horton, 2024, Noone et al., 2025). Regardless, the Cass report has been used by the government to justify a permanent ban on the use of puberty blockers for trans children in the UK[5]. This was followed by the Sullivan report in 2025, recommending that all public bodies record sex as assigned at birth (Walker, 2025). This was swiftly implemented for trans youth, with the NHS removing the option for under-18s to alter records to reflect their gender.

One of the primary arguments put forward by anti-trans activists regarding trans youth is that trans young people do not have the capacity to consent to gender-affirming care,

[5] Notably, this ban only applies to trans children. Puberty blockers are still approved for use in cases of cis children with precocious puberty.

with some groups pushing for a higher age limit of 25 before trans people are allowed to medically transition[6]. This argument undermines the long-established legal precedent of Gillick competency and is one of the unifying principles between anti-trans activists and far-right activists seeking to repeal abortion laws (Links & Moore, 2022). In addition to age, the apparent higher prevalence of neurodiversity, particularly autism, amongst trans people has also been argued as a reason trans youth cannot be trusted authorities on their own experience (Hayward, 2025). This argument, reliant on the pathologisation of neurodivergence and trans identities to justify denying personal autonomy, is a recurring theme in many areas of trans youths' lives.

Conversion therapy ban

Since 2018, the government has committed to introducing a ban on "conversion therapy", a term for "coercive practices that aim to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity" (House of Commons Library, 2024). Whilst it is an issue at all ages, the proposed ban would only be total for under-18s, with adult conversion practices only being banned if the subject is coerced or does not have the capacity to consent. At the time of writing, a draft Conversion Practices Bill is still to be published for consultation. In the intervening years, the planned ban has involved numerous U-turns on whether gender identity will be covered by the ban (Sherwood & Stewart, 2022). One of the primary arguments made for the exclusion of gender identity from a ban on conversion therapy is that being trans is itself a form of conversion therapy, turning cis gay people into straight trans people. This argument is made despite there being no evidence for transitions motivated by homophobia (Ashley, 2020a) and the proliferation of LGBQ+ trans people (Puckett et al. 2021).

2.2.2 Education

In 2021 the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) scrapped planned school guidance for the support of trans students, after apparent government pressure not to be "too progressive" (Hunte, 2022). The leaked planned guidance aimed to help teachers tackle transphobic bullying and provided good practice tips for protecting trans pupils using the Equality Act 2010. At the same time, the government was suppressing the

[6] This had gained enough purchase by the time of writing that one GIC (Chalmers in Scotland) halted all surgery referrals for under 25s (Thomas, 2024) until backlash eventually resulted in a reversal of the decision.

release of research into anti-LGBTQ bullying in British schools (Grove, 2024). This was the context at the time data was collected for this project.

In December 2023, the Department for Education released draft non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England on how to approach “gender questioning children” (Department for Education, 2023). The guidance states that schools have “no general duty” to support social transition and advises doing everything possible to avoid doing so before agreeing. It also advises that parental consent should be sought before supporting a child’s social transition, undermining the autonomy and capacity of trans children socially, in the same way that restrictions on healthcare have medically.

The guidance puts forward three main concerns as to why trans children’s capacity to socially transition should be questioned: the social contagion argument that they may have been “influenced by peers or social media”, the trans-identity-as-conversion-therapy argument that a student may feel pressured to transition in order to change their sexuality or non-normative gender expression, and the neurodivergence-as-lack-of-self-authority argument by questioning whether the child has Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) before supporting transition.

Moving on to Higher Education, the political and media focus has been on the “academic freedom” of university lecturers to be outspokenly “gender-critical” without student protest in response (Baker, 2023). In the most high-profile instance of this, the University of Sussex was fined £585,000 in 2025 for “failing to uphold freedom of speech” by not preventing students from protesting the anti-trans views of Professor Kathleen Stock (Weale, 2025). There is no acknowledgement in these narratives of the abuse and censorship trans students and academics face (Baker, 2023). Ahmed (2025a) describes such situations as “insistence on relation”, in which marginalised students are presented with the condition that they must “accept abuse as a condition of access” to education and employment.

Here is a striking switch of concern for the trans child as a victim of influence in primary and secondary education to the gender-critical academic as a victim of hostile trans students in higher education (Ahmed, 2025b). In both narratives, the perpetrator is presented as “trans ideology”.

2.2.3 Violence

The rise in respectable transphobia has not meant a reduction in less socially acceptable forms of hostility, with recorded incidents of transphobic hate crime (all ages) rising from 2,799 in 2020/21 to 4,780 in 2023/24 (Home Office, 2024). Between February 2023 and the time of writing, at least three teenage trans girls have been the victims of transphobic stabbings in the UK (Evans, 2025; Billson, 2024), one fatally: 16-year-old Brianna Ghey (Pidd, 2023). It is worth noting that in two of these three cases, the perpetrators were peers in their age group judged to be motivated at least in part by transphobia, challenging the argument that being trans is considered socially desirable amongst young people. It is relevant to the current study that since her daughter's death, Esther Ghey has been campaigning to ban social media access for all under-16s, as she holds social media partly to blame for the murder (Brown, 2025). However, there have also been interviews with Brianna Ghey's trans friends describing her as a much-loved member of their online support network (Hunte, 2023), which such a ban would have denied them.

2.2.4 Suicide

Concurrent to the escalating barriers to trans youth's social and medical transition and support, there has also been mainstream censure of expressing concern that this has contributed to increased suicidality amongst trans youth (e.g. Good Law Project, 2024), with Baroness Cass calling it "shroud waving" (Hayward, 2024)[7]. A government inquiry into trans youth suicide rates found no increase, but a subsequent FOI request found that cases had been left out of the review (Page, 2024). Regardless of the suicide data, arguments about whether the difficulties facing trans youth are fatal distract from trans youth's rights to autonomy and lives that are more than merely survivable (UNICEF, 1989).

[7] High-profile suicides of trans young people in the UK in recent years include: Charlie Millers in 2020, aged 17 (Smyth, 2024); Jason Pullman in 2022, aged 15 (Hossein-Pour & Dale, 2024); Alice Litman in 2022, aged 20 (Banfield-Nwachi, 2023) and Corei Hall, in 2023, aged 14 (Reaidi & Gamble, 2024).

2.2.5 Activism

In the context of all the above, UK trans youth have been rarely listened to (Lee, 2023; Horton, 2024a) or platformed, but they have begun to become more politically organised. One example of this is the formation of the group Trans Kids Deserve Better (2024), whose members have been taking part in direct action such as occupying offices belonging to the NHS and the Department of Education, protesting the lack of both medical and social support.

2.3 Online antagonism and harassment

Focusing on the current online context, limiting background information to the UK is less straightforward, as there are no national borders online. As a result, this section of the background focuses on UK evidence where possible, but broadens at points to the online anglosphere.

Social media is central to trans-hostile organising. A Home Office report links the 56% rise in reports of transphobic hate crime in 2021-22 to trans-hostile narratives being spread online (Dearden, 2022). The potential for online vitriol to have AFK consequences is an example of "onlife violence" (Gabriels & Lanzing, 2020), and another reason why "online" and "offline" experiences cannot be neatly separated.

Cross (2019) proposed a model for categorising online harassment in the form of an inverted pyramid divided into three orders, coming down to the point on the individual target. First-order harassment is when direct actions are taken against the target. This can be as direct and extreme as the practices of "doxing" and "swatting": finding and publishing someone's location and/or other personal information online, then calling in false reports of extreme violence on that location in an attempt to get the target killed by police, respectively. This onlife form of violence was enacted as a part of a targeted campaign against the trans Twitch streamer Keffals in 2022 (Sung, 2022).

Second-order harassment is person-to-person online abuse, such as slurs and hateful comments, made to the target directly but contained to the internet. Third-order harassment is made up of the posts and comments about, but not directed to, the target that nonetheless justify and incite them being targeted and maintain the attention on them with continued engagement. Second and third-order harassment are the most

easily and frequently repeatable forms of harm enabled by digital technology (Thomas et al. 2021), making networked harassment possible with minimal effort.

A complication of second and third-order harassment is that it can take subtler forms of "friendly harassment" in which the tone used is polite or at least civil; this form of harassment often involves rhetorical devices such as microaggressions (Lu & Jurgens, 2022), sealioning (Claeys, 2024) and concern-trolling. These can all be forms of "trolling", when they are used to trick people into good-faith engagement with bad-faith positions with the intent of making them look foolish and/or wasting their time and wearing them out (Davis, 2020; DiFranco, 2020). The rhetoric used by TERFs (and other anti-trans figures who require respectability and legitimacy in the public sphere) online frequently utilises dog whistles, condescension, microaggressions and otherwise plausibly deniable forms of hostility to harass trans people and their allies (Lu & Jurgens, 2022).

In trying to explain how people justify taking part in harassment, rather than being recognised and accepted into the "in-group' of a network, Marwick (2021) defines morally-motivated networked harassment as occurring when someone is singled out as having violated a moral principle of a network of people with shared values, this violation then becomes highly shared, usually with amplification by a highly connected account (known as a "node" in network analysis), leading to the targeted person being inundated with unwanted negative contact, from insults to death threats. Integrating Cross' model here, the highly connected account takes part in third-order harassment that, due to the size of their network, leads to a cascade of up to all three orders of harassment. As well as anxiety and depression, a common result of being a target of this type of onlife violence is self-censorship and a decrease in public online activity. Despite the intensity of networked harassment, Marwick (2021) found that regardless of demographics, targets felt that due to societal framing of events online not being "real life", they were embarrassed and ashamed of the scale of the negative impact it had on their wellbeing. This relates to what Cross refers to as the "Mobius strip of reality and unreality", in which online harassment is treated as both serious and trivial depending on what the harasser needs to be true to simultaneously justify their action and dismiss the negative impact it has on their target (Cross, 2014; 2019; 2024).

Trans people are often the target of networked harassment by people who view trans existence as morally degenerate and thus their harassment as justified, but it is often also used as a form of entertainment (Smith, 2021). For example, the notorious hate forum Kiwi Farms keeps a counter celebrating how many trans people its users have driven to suicide in this way (Breland, 2023). Whilst this is an extreme example, research has found that such networked harassment of trans people is common. In their 2019 report on online transphobia, Brandwatch & Ditch the Label found that online transphobia was highly networked, and members of these networks amplified each other (perpetuating third-order harassment). Such evidence brings into question what political agency can be levied by trans people online if a reactionary network shouts them down in a manner known to have such negative impacts on targets and their future willingness to post publicly.

Brandwatch & Ditch the Label (2019) also found that UK transphobic content was twice as likely as US transphobic content to be on the topic of parenting, suggesting a greater focus on children and youth in UK transphobia. However, this may have changed in the intervening years as far-right groups in the US have begun to target LGBT+ events for young people (Herley, 2022) and associate LGBT+ adults with "grooming" (Links, 2022). The "groomer" slur has been aided in popularity through the networked harassment of people who support trans young people by large social media accounts such as Libs of TikTok, which has been implicated in death and bomb threats made towards staff of multiple children's hospitals after being singled out by the account for providing gender-affirming care (Lorenz et al. 2022); an example of a highly-connected account taking part in third-order harassment, leading to extreme first-order harassment that the highly-connected account can then deny direct responsibility for.

Analysis of online content by Links (2022) notes an increase in expressed desire to do violence to trans people; one of the key themes expressed in violent transphobic content regarded trans young people either being the victims of "grooming", thus justifying violence against trans adults seen as perpetrating this, or included in an assessment of trans people as predators, and consequently, calls for violence (Links, 2022).

A Galop report on UK transphobic hate crime found that transphobic abuse was so common online that even trans people who avoided direct abuse are likely to encounter,

and be impacted by, such abuse being aimed at other trans people (Bradley, 2020). This is an issue for youth as well as adults, with 52% of LGBTQ+ respondents to the 2022 Digital Youth Index reporting experiencing hate speech online (Nominet, 2022). This may be related to the following year's results (Digital Youth Index, 2023), which found that 47% of LGBTQ+ respondents agreed with the statement "social media has a negative impact on people like me," compared with 38% of the total youth sample.

2.3.1 Online harassment of trans youth

Research on the experiences of UK LGBTQ+ students with social media conducted by Talbot et al. (2020), found of this group, trans students were particularly likely to receive abuse online:

> "This huge amount of hate from, effectively, a faceless group of people on social media being like, 'you're disgusting' 'you shouldn't exist' 'you're a danger to society' or 'you're just a really confused person who needs mental health treatment.' (P13, genderfluid transmasculine, pansexual)".

Online exposure to transphobic sentiment has AFK consequences for trans youth just as it does for adults, as it can lead to trans youth feeling it is not safe to be openly trans in their day-to-day lives and contribute to feelings of hopelessness (Marzetti et al. 2022).

Having examined the current context of issues faced by trans people in general and trans youth specifically, in the UK and online anglosphere, it is necessary to dedicate some space to the history of trans internet use to complete the contextualization of the literature review.

2.4 History of trans internet use

In *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet*, Dame-Griff (2023) charts how the "internet revolution" made the "transgender revolution" possible. Before the advent of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), Usenet, and eventually AOL groups, the dispersed people who then identified as cross-dressers, transvestites (TV) and transsexuals (TS) (collectively referred to as "the gender community"[8]) were dependent

[8] There is a conspicuous absence of transmasc trans people from the early trans internet archive, consistent with the relative lack of transmasc publications compared to "TV/TS" magazines and newsletters. The hypervisibility of transfems making AFK environments higher risk is often cited as the reason for their dominance in these media.

on physical community-produced media such as magazines and newsletters for information and community contact. Due to the niche and stigmatised nature of these publications, finding them was a significant barrier for entry to the uninitiated, and meant community organisers had to go to lengths such as placing falsified reference cards in the "transsexuality" sections of library catalogues, containing details for getting in touch. When the first gender community BBS, GenderNet, was launched in 1984, it was advertised in gender community publications, which also ran how-to articles for getting online and encouraged their readers to take up the opportunity presented by this new technology.

By 1998, when UK trans scholar Whittle published the paper Trans Cyberian Mailway, there was already enough trans internet history for him to set out the way in which trans people had seized upon the internet to connect as a small, scattered demographic, in a way that had not been possible before. The term "transgender" had already begun to be used in certain US trans circles as a more expansive term to bring gender-diverse people under one large tent and to resist the pathologising of the biomedical model of trans existence (Feinberg, 2013; Malatino, 2022). However, it was the internet that allowed the term to spread and thus, the *transgender community* to be born from what had previously been smaller, separate subcultures (Whittle, 1998).

This transformation of disparate "gender community" identities into one "transgender community" did not happen organically but was the result of concerted efforts by activists. Internet service providers were initially reluctant to host the gender community; their existence was believed to be inherently sexual and thus their presence pornographic; censorship was rife, and the gender community had to mobilise together to convince internet companies that they were "respectable" netizens (Dame-Griff, 2023). The term "transgender" eventually emerged from intracommunity discourse about what umbrella term to use to mobilize on shared interests, appearing to initially have been proposed online in 1991 by Holly Boswell. The newly (relatively) united and organised trans community were then able to lobby service providers such as AOL to allow them to operate public groups by demonstrating their value as a customer base.

Whilst GenderNet was launched in 1984, the earliest examples in the archives of trans youth seeking support online appear to date to 1989, suggesting the internet was viewed

as a potential refuge by trans youth extremely early in its existence (Dame-Griff, 2023). Despite this, trans groups online, as with ones AFK, were reluctant to include or engage trans youth, fearing angry parents and/or legal ramifications. Online trans spaces that did allow youth to join often found that youth were alienated by the generation gap, finding older trans people had different experiences and priorities, and thus had very little to offer them (ibid, 2023). Larger LGBT organisations eventually set up dedicated trans youth chat rooms, but it was not until the advent of web 2.0 (so named in 2004 but emerging in the several years preceding this), when it became much easier for users to create their own online content, and do so collaboratively, that trans youth were able to create autonomous online communities via blogging, and later, social media.

Exactly what constitutes social media versus other forms of online content has not always been clear, when from the earliest days of BBS, the internet was being used for social interaction. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) provide the following definition of social media: "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)". UGC being online creative media (be that text, image, or video), posted on a publicly accessible platform, on a personal basis on the part of the poster. Thus, a picture from a holiday posted to Instagram is UGC on social media, but an out-of-office email saying the sender is on holiday is not UGC nor social media. The examination of existing research that follows includes work that ranges in specificity of scope from "online" in general to particular social media platforms.

2.5 Trans Youth online

There is a consistent trend of young people spending more time online than older demographics (Ofcom, 2021), and what little research that has been conducted on how much time LGBT+ young people spend online varies between more (GLSEN, 2013) or comparable to (Herrmann et al. 2024) their straight, cisgender peers. This is not surprising when contextualised with evidence such as Stonewall's 2017 School Report, which found that 90% of LGBTQ+ young people surveyed felt they could be themselves online, whilst 60% did not have an adult at home they could talk to about being LGBTQ+ (Bradlow et al. 2017).

Fearmongering around the dangers the internet poses to young people (Formby, 2017) including the social contagion of transness (Breslow, 2021, Wiggins, 2021) do not represent a new technopanic[9], but it is one that has been escalating in recent years to overshadow any benefits of social media use for trans youth in popular discourse, e.g. *The Times* article "Trans charity's chatroom for children condemned as irresponsible free-for-all" (Bannerman, 2022). Despite this, there has been a growing body of research about the role social media plays in trans lives since Whittle's Trans Cyberian Mailway, much of which (in English) is US-based. Emphasizing the *world-wide* quality of the world wide web, it is tempting to dismiss the relevance of where internet users and/or researchers are based, yet whilst trans youth can and do connect internationally, local contexts will inevitably have differing and wide-ranging effects e.g. the proposed Kids Online Safety Act in the US intended by its sponsors to "protect minor children from the transgender [sic] in our culture" (Reed, 2023). It is therefore worth noting where research into trans youth and social media is (and isn't) being conducted.

In addition to differing issues between countries, as with any other demographic, young trans people are not one-dimensional, and intersecting demographic memberships are likely to play a role in their experiences of social media, for example, Black trans women experience specific issues related to transmisogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). It is therefore important to take an intersectional view and not assume that transness is the defining influence on trans youths' experiences (Galpin, 2022).

[9] In the 1990s, for years after allowing LGBT chat rooms to exist for adults, AOL did not allow for the combination of LGBT terms with "teen" or "youth"; platforms where this was permitted were protested as "hunting ground for pedophiles", a sentiment organisations such as GLAAD counterprotested (Dame-Griff, 2023). The result of this technopanic in the US was the passing of the Communications Decency Act in 1996, which disproportionately affected LGBT+ youth, until it was repealed the following year.

3. Literature review

Research on how trans youth as a specific demographic engage with social media is relatively sparse; this literature review will therefore include both adult/general and youth-specific research on trans social media use, and LGBT+/queer as well as trans-specific research on youth social media use, maintaining a focus on trans youth specific-research where it exists.

3.1 Identity Work

Due to "cultural cisgenderism", previous generations of trans young people were denied knowledge about themselves (Kennedy, 2018), but online trans content provides alternative identity possibilities which trans youth can navigate to find what makes sense to them. Kennedy describes this as a culture of agentic learning, in which trans youth have the resources to educate themselves, setting their own curriculum and avoiding hegemonic influence on the learning environment (Kennedy, 2021).

Whilst the internet is not the sole venue where identity work takes place, it has been found to be particularly important for LGBTQ youth (Craig and McInroy, 2014), especially those who do not have access to an AFK community for any variety of reasons e.g. living in rural areas or during covid-19 lock downs (Gray, 2009, Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021).

In a study of Dutch sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth Brinkman & Francot (2022) found 5 themes in the roles social media played in their participants' identity work: realization of SGM-identity, gathering information, finding SGM-representation, finding SGM-connections, and social media as an SGM-positive bubble. These themes are representative of a great deal of existing literature and will be examined in detail throughout the rest of the chapter. Before that, however, it is important to continue to explore the active role trans youth take in online worldbuilding.

Trans youth are not only constructing their own curricula from existing online content, but also contributing to the flow of identity discourse in their roles as what Klug et al. (2021) term "Produsers", platform users who also produce content. Schudson and Van Anders (2019) note the phenomenon of "compulsory labelling" amongst queer and trans young people online due to the growing awareness of the importance of positionality, so as not to *other* people with different lived experiences. For example, "allosexual",

meaning someone who experiences attraction to others, was coined in queer youth online networks so that asexual people had a way to talk about people who are not asexual without having to default to "normal" and thus be positioned as "abnormal" in contrast. This creativity is just one example of how queer and trans youth are active participants in social media rather than merely passive consumers, developing language when they find existing vocabulary a barrier to the identity work they need to do. This has been further evidenced by research such as Cronesberry & Ward's (2024) examination of the role of social media in identity development for UK gender-diverse young adults in which they found that participants actively contributed to developing new language to describe trans experiences.

Contrary to anti-trans arguments that young people are being indoctrinated with a monolithic "gender ideology" leading them to identify as trans (Breslow, 2021), research shows constant intracommunity negotiation and conflict occurs online about gender identities and "who counts" as trans (Sutherland, 2021). In analysing posts on a trans Reddit board, Sutherland (2021) identified three main themes of trans membership models held by trans board users: unbounded (anyone can be trans), socio-biological (only those who experience gender dysphoria and/or euphoria are trans) and medically-based (only those with diagnosable Gender Identity Disorder and who require healthcare are trans). Whilst in the dominant public, the medical model of trans membership makes up the narrative of transnormativity (McDonald, 2006, Johnson, 2015), Sutherland argues that this does not necessarily create a hierarchy of identity within trans-specific online spaces, but that continuous negotiation of membership boundaries leads to an ever-evolving category of "transgender"[10]. This concept of negotiated evolution is supported by Zimman & Hayworth's (2020) linguistic analysis of trans LiveJournal.com communities between 2000-2016, in which they were able to

[10] This intracommunity conflict and discourse dates back at least as far as the early trans Usenet groups, where "flame wars" would often be waged over similar themes: who is "truly" trans? Is it better to be a respectable assimilationist or reject the gender binary entirely? It was through such flame wars, and the prolific posting of Laura Blake specifically, that the term cisgender emerged into common usage, having first been used on Usenet in 1994 (Dame-Griff, 2023).

track the rise and fall of different terminologies, such as "genderqueer" being supplanted by "non-binary" as the standard umbrella term for trans people who are neither men nor women. These findings appear to support what Halberstam posits in *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005, p156.): "both transsexuality and transgenderism shift and change in meaning as well as application *in relation to each other* rather than in relation to a hegemonic medical discourse." (original emphasis). Interestingly, both "transsexuality" and "transgenderism" are terms Zimman and Hayworth's research found were problematised and mostly fell out of use on trans LiveJournal communities in the years immediately after *In a Queer Time and Place* was published, further evidencing Halberstam's point.

Despite this conceptualisation of constant negotiation and conflict over boundaries and boarders being productive, it has been found to lead to some negative online experiences for trans people, who can be alienated if they find themselves in an online trans space where concepts of gender do not match their own or rejected if they enter the discourse in the "wrong" way (McGuiness, 2018). This appears to be due to instances of trans people with different conceptions of gender and transness becoming sectarian (Jacobsen et al. 2022), with trans people with shared views on gender creating their own spaces, such as the subreddit "truscum" for trans people who subscribe to a medically-based model of transness (Amm, 2022, Konnelly, 2023).[11] In an autoethnography of their experience with truscum content on social media, Amm (2022, p.4) describes the way that content advocating a medical model of transnormativity contributed to them feeling they were "not trans enough": "To discover, during such a vulnerable time, that there seems to be a group of trans people who would revoke my already shaky sense of nonbinary authenticity, feels terrifying."

Thus, whilst on a macro scale, such conflict may drive concept development in trans discourse, at the level of the individual, exposure to trans groups who gatekeep transness to strict criteria may impede identity work for those early in identity development.

[11] "Truscum" being the reclaimed truncated insult "true transexual scum", existing in opposition to trans people who believe in unbounded transness who use the reclaimed insult "tucute" (from "too cute to be cis").

3.2 Demonstrating Possibilities

In working out what identity labels mean, and which belong to them, research shows trans youth also use social media to get an idea of what they can expect and what is possible for people like themselves (in line with Brinkman & Francot's (2022) theme of finding representation).

In an analysis of common themes in trans youth-produced YouTube videos, O'Neill (2014) found that the five most common themes were: transition timelines, tips for "passing" or "doing" gender, talking about the day-to-day changes experienced on hormones, sharing experiences of transphobic bullying and trans celebrity channels. Most of these themes relate to what Barnett (2015) terms the "fleshy metamorphosis" in image-based trans online content, the transformation of the body over the course of "hormone time" (Horak, 2014). These types of YouTube videos are so common that they have become a genre, with identifiable tropes and norms. The production of transnormative transition narratives through such videos has been critiqued as reproducing reductionist, binary gender possibilities for trans youth, that conclude when transition is "complete" (Borck, & Moore, 2019).

Despite this, some researchers argue that, as with identity work, there is space in online trans representations for multiple forms of transition, even if one is favoured in the dominant public. Subaltern trans bodies that do not present a normative transition narrative are also represented on YouTube, by trans vloggers who consciously produce possibilities of self-invention that resist a binary gaze (Tortajada et al. 2021). However, as will be explored later, the algorithmic creation and promotion of certain types of content can act as a normative force (Dobson et al. 2018) that makes some forms of transness easier to find than others (Devito, 2022), regardless of what is technically available. That said, despite the prominence of certain types of transition content, a variety of transition representations are available online. As a result, trans youth have the option to find the "mirror" which best fits their experience and therefore, models possibilities. The importance of documenting and sharing transition videos to trans re/production is recognised by trans creators themselves, as Raun (2015, p.365) shows in a quote from one trans YouTuber: "Without that mirroring that this camera gives you I am not sure it's really possible to transition fully. (from the vlog of Mason, 19 September 2010)".

Trans youth aren't just watching these videos, they are making them, and it has been argued that producing them can be a rare source of agency for trans youth (Horak, 2014). However, this presumes a trans young person who is safe and comfortable being that publicly visible as trans, when the "default publicness" of social media platforms such as YouTube is much riskier for certain groups, such as trans people of colour (Cho, 2018) and those from unsupportive homes (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2021).

Trans-made videos on platforms like YouTube and TikTok that are available to the general public as well as other trans people, in addition to representing possibilities for trans people, have also been found to potentially reduce stigma amongst cis people exposed to them (Jolley et al. 2025; Rodriguez-de-Dios & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024). This is theorised to be the result of the familiarising effect of the parasocial nature of this mediated contact (Schiappa et al. 2005). This is an example of the difficulty of teasing out the ways in which trans youth engage with social media. When a trans young person makes and publishes a transition blog video on social media, they may be creating a narrative for themselves, modelling possibilities for other trans youth and reducing stigma through parasocial exposure simultaneously, with various levels of intent for each result.

In an ethnographic analysis of LGBTQ+ content created and engaged with by LGBT+ youth on TikTok during the first wave of COVID-19, Hiebert & Kortes-Miller (2021) found trans youth who were filming themselves coming out to their parents and posting the videos on the platform. Positive parental reactions were met with comments from other users about how reassuring it is to see such reactions are possible. Similar comments were found on TikTok videos made by trans adults about their careers, with trans youth thanking them for the representation of possibility (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021). Conversely, videos posted by trans youth about how they had been rejected, abused, and/or thrown out by their families after disclosing their trans status were met with validation and offers of emotional and material support. Comments expressing anger at how these young people had been treated and offers to be their "new" or "found" family, made directly to the young people but in a public medium, is another example of the power of parasocial exposure.

3.3 Managing Disclosures and Context Collapse

As a range of possibilities for trans youth, including rejection and hostility, are represented on social media, it is not unusual for trans youth to want to control the visibility of their trans status online.

In 1986, Meyrowitz described the beginnings of what he termed "context collapse" with the emergence of digital communication. Sociologists have long noted that people tend to specialise their presentation to the audience they are addressing: friends, family, colleagues, strangers, etc., but with electronic media, Meyrowitz (1986) foresaw people becoming open to all possible contexts collapsing together. This can be seen in modern public social media presences, where people either present a subdued, generic version of themselves, or risk being misunderstood by the wrong audience (Odell, 2020). For trans people, the risk of context collapse can be dire if someone from the wrong group, such as a violently transphobic family member, sees social media content that they were not intended to see.

A certain amount of publicness is necessary for trans people to find each other, but publicness comes with risks such as context collapse, online vitriol and misinformation. Thus, there is a need for a spectrum of online privacy and visibility for trans young people. Research has found that trans people and LGBT+ youth put a lot of work into managing their identity disclosures and presentations on different platforms and accounts (Buss et al. 2022, Are et al. 2024), often having multiple accounts and audience settings on the same platform to ensure the desired segregation of information (Hanckel et al. 2019). This granular plasticity of privacy requires constant attention to avoid context collapses and unintended disclosures (McConnell et al. 2018), which can be extremely stressful, especially for trans young people living in situations where they do not feel safe to be "out" as trans (Haimson et al, 2015).

Conversely, the ubiquity of the largest platforms such as Facebook, and the normalisation of sharing content, can provide opportunities for testing the water for LGBTQ+ youth, who want an idea of how the people in their lives may react to their identity. Bates et al. (2020) found LGBT+ youth using tactics such as sharing a video from an LGBT+ charity and seeing who "likes" or comments on it, providing plausible deniability if there is a strong negative reaction as it is not content that they have

produced personally. The level of formality with which a platform frames content can also influence trans users' ability to test new contexts, for example platforms with anti-anonymity policies such as real-name requirements make it very difficult for trans users to gradually or partially transition to a new name or gender (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016), whereas platforms that allow for temporary or easily changeable usernames facilitate experimentation with new public identities (Hanckel et al. 2019).

3.4 Gathering Information

Before social media, trans people had to find and join AFK support networks, either face-to-face or via post, to gain access to the "transsexual lore" (Bolin, 1983): libraries of documents of information about how to socially and medically transition. The necessarily limited nature of these "recipes" pales in comparison to the range of resources now available online for trans people needing advice on how to transition. Coupled with representations of varied examples of what transition can be, trans youth can build a bespoke curriculum based on the nuances of their ideal embodied selves, but they also must negotiate misinformation and hate speech. In their research on trans health information seeking online, Augustaitis et al. (2021) found that the temporal mix of synchronous communication and searchable archive was key to why most participants identified social media platforms as the most useful source of information. Not only do trans people access the modern equivalent of Bolin's (1983) lore by looking up "permanent" resources such as documents shared in Facebook groups, Instagram infographics, YouTube transition testimonials, etc., but they are also able to communicate in real-time to ask for advice, support, or clarification from other trans platform users. There are challenges to using social media for trans health information; when public and unmoderated (or moderated by a platform whose policies do not recognise or forbid transphobia), hate speech and misinformation are rife. Augustaitis et al.'s (2021) participants described a range of incidents in which hateful or incorrect transition-related social media content set them back in their own transitions. Participants expressed that moderation is essential for quality and safety when seeking trans health information, as platforms cannot or will not do this work, it often falls to trans users themselves to create private groups in which there can be quality control. Thus, information-seeking joins the identity work found by Cronesberry & Ward (2024) as reasons trans youth need online spaces in which they can enforce safety boundaries.

3.5 Community and emotional support

In the best-case scenario, trans youth would experience community and emotional support in all areas of their lives, and research suggests that the AFK support of family and friends has stronger associations with psychological adjustment than online connections (Curth & Mayeux, 2024), but online support still plays an important part for a variety of trans youths' needs.

Trans and gender minority youth who experience physical isolation particularly value emotional support from LGBT+ and trans-specific online spaces, as such support is inaccessible AFK (Karim et al. 2022). This is the same finding as with identity work, information seeking, etc., as social media is commonly the only option for all trans-specific needs in this situation.

In interviews with US trans teenagers, Selkie et al. (2020) found interacting with other trans people online provided a vital source of hope for the future that prevented them from acting on suicidal ideation. They also found that acts of affirmation as small as "liking" posts provided important emotional support, especially around building confidence in their appearance. In a case study of a nonbinary Tumblr account Oakley (2017) argues that community-building on social media is participatory and requires awareness to build an "ethos". However, findings such as Selkie et al.'s (2020) show that this participation does not necessarily have to be laborious.

Emotional support and community building are not restricted to direct text-based communication. Rothbaum et al. (2022) found that trans adults felt emotionally supported by consuming the YouTube videos of trans content creators and fostered community by sharing the videos with other trans people in their networks. This sense of emotional attachment joins reducing stigma as another benefit of parasocial contact via social media.

3.6 Private groups

Whilst publicness is vital for some purposes, such as activism and fundraising, examined later, relative privacy plays an important role for trans youth online as well. Private groups that only members can access on platforms such as Facebook, specifically for trans people, allow trans youth to seek information, validation, advice, and build

relationships in safer environments than the internet at large (Paceley et al., 2022; Selkie et al., 2020; McGuiness, 2018).

Haimson (2020) interviewed adult users of the platform Trans Time and other trans-specific groups and identified the features and affordances that make trans-specific social media spaces safer. Relatively small sizes, aided by an invite-only joining policy or the vetting of membership through testing of trans-specific knowledge, were commonly credited with safety from TERFs and other trans-hostile actors. However, as Haimson points out, this makes such sources of support harder to access for the most isolated and uninitiated trans people. Despite this limitation, a small, private group also facilitates other safety tactics that can only come from people with a "sense of a shared experience and understanding", such as bottom-up community moderation, a standardised content warning system, and a code of conduct. Granular privacy settings that provide maximum control to produsers over the audience of each post also grant maximum autonomy *within* trans-specific spaces, so that the same level of intimacy is not guaranteed to all members. All the above contribute to, while it is understood that there is no such thing as a completely safe space, a "safer space" than is otherwise available to trans people to document transition and build community.

Young people from marginalised groups, including trans people of colour, have described the safe spaces afforded by private online groups of their peers as essential for healing from the exhaustion and pain of fighting against oppression (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2021). This may have particular relevance for trans youth in the UK, who Todd (2023) found expressed exhaustion from the slow everyday forms of suffering that come with being trans in the current time, such as the issues outlined in the previous UK context section, and the resulting affective states such as the hypervigilance of "being constantly preoccupied with anticipating others' potentially hostile gazes". In the face of this exhaustion Todd (2023, p.783) found "hopeful, resilient, and persistent capacities of young trans people, trans communities, and trans and queer spaces to survive and flourish".

Following these findings, private social media networks can be said to offer a deeper sense of community than the weak ties of "the politics of visibility" and offer some protection from surveillance by hostile actors (Milan, 2015). The issue with this tactical

separatism, however, is that it isolates marginalised groups from potential allies from other groups (and likewise, other groups who require allyship). Whilst the trans population is extremely difficult to quantify, best estimates place trans people between 0.35% and 1% of the population (Guyan, 2022). Being such a small minority, outside support is essential to meet both political and material needs, as the trans health crisis neatly demonstrates.

3.7 Material Resources

Due to the costly nature of trans healthcare and the inadequate provision for it in public healthcare, many trans people crowdfund for their healthcare using campaign pages, which they share through social media. Barcelos & Budge (2019) found that whilst only around 20% of trans healthcare fundraisers meet their goals, the percentage that is raised is significantly related to how many Facebook shares the campaigns get. They also found that young, white, trans men were the demographic most likely to raise the money they needed. This bias in fundraising success has begun to be addressed by grassroots community initiatives such as FiveforFive, a UK collective fund that donates to randomly selected transfem crowdfunds every month (FiveforFive, 2022). Projects like this have the added benefit of allowing the beneficiaries to retain their privacy if they wish.

Fritz & Gonzales (2018) note that many trans people take part in *privacy calculus* when trying to raise funds, knowing that people are more likely to donate to a cause with a detailed personal narrative, but to provide this often means disclosing the parts of their bodies they are least comfortable with ("I have boobs! isn't that weird?") to a mostly cisgender public; a public that already displays a sense of ownership over trans bodies. Fritz and Gonzales also found that trans people experienced a pressure to be legible as a trans subject in order to be seen as worthy of funds, that is, to conform to a transnormative "born in the wrong body" narrative to reassure potential donors that they are truly in need, regardless of the nuances of their true experience.

3.8 Activism

As already addressed in the history section, activism has been a significant driver of trans internet use since the 1980s (Dame-Griff, 2023; Shapiro, 2004). With the advent of Web 2.0 and social media, this activism moved from a predominantly text-based, convenient way to organise across distances in relative privacy, to more audiovisual content across

networked publics. This meant incorporating activist elements across a range of contexts, e.g. trans social media "influencers" (Tortajada et al. 2021). The context collapse of public social media can be utilised to demonstrate the entangled nature of the personal and the political, such as the long-established transfem hashtag #girlslikeus, which trans women have been found to use to raise awareness external to the community and seek emotional support within the community (Jackson et al. 2018).

Despite the escalation of online abuse and the risk of onlife violence in recent years, for many trans people, social media remains the safest and most accessible option for taking part in activism. In the case of trans youth specifically, Erlick (2018) has outlined the ways in which social media helped her and her peers overcome AFK barriers to organising over trans issues. For example, it is very difficult for youth-run organisations to gain "formal" recognition and thus be taken seriously as stakeholders and lobbyists. Social media allows trans youth to organise, build reach, and create digital resources without the kind of funding that "official" status would normally facilitate. Additionally, being less integrated with established neo-liberal (adult-run) LGBT+ organisations provides trans youth with the opportunity to take more radical, anti-assimilationist stances (as exemplified recently by the direct actions of Trans Kids Deserve Better).

When looking at younger trans youth, that is, children and younger teens, it is less likely that their social media presence and activism can be disentangled from that of their families or carers. Platero et al. (2025) examined the activism of trans girls with supportive parents who share a joint social media account. As with the hashtag #girlslikeus (Jackson et al. 2018), this social media content blends the personal with the political, raising the question of what differentiates a social media influencer from an activist. If parasociality can reduce anti-trans stigma, then making a public display of the personal can be argued to be activism. Much like the privacy calculus of raising funds for healthcare (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018), trans children and their parents who have a public social media presence must weigh up the cost of giving up their privacy against the potential benefits of destigmatising trans children in the eyes of a cisnormative public.

The most notable and consistent tradition of trans activism online that has survived the many changes in social media is Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDoR), which originated as an online project by Gwendolyn Ann Smith in 1999, as a way of recording

and bearing witness to the trans people who die by anti-trans violence every year (Rawson, 2014). Today, there are AFK TDoR vigils held transnationally, but a lot of TDoR events are still held online.[12] That the core of modern trans activism is built around violence and death in this way will be critically explored in the framework section. Before that, it is worth examining existing work on online activism around trans youth death.

As a specific case study, in 2014, Leelah Alcorn, a 17-year-old trans girl in Ohio, posted her suicide note on her Tumblr account, which she had scheduled to publish on the platform after she had completed suicide. In the note, Leelah details her parents' attempts to get her to desist from her trans identity, including removing her from school and sending her for "conversion therapy" (Associated Press, 2015). In a study of how people respond to high-profile suicides on Twitter (now X), Karamshuk et al. (2017) found that Leelah Alcorn's death garnered a different composition of responses than the other non-trans-associated deaths they looked at. Emphasis on the negative actions of others made up a higher volume of tweets than any of the other deaths and was accompanied by considerable activist content.

A similar example from the UK is the murder of 16-year-old trans girl Brianna Ghey in February 2023, after which vigils were held all over the country, coordinated and promoted via social media. These vigils not only served as venues for trans people to come together and express their grief at losing another member of the community to violence, they also acted as sites of protest against the environment of transphobia that contextualised Brianna's killing (Pickles, 2023).

Erlick (2018) noted how the social media capital built by Alcorn's death was critiqued by racialised trans youth activists, who contributed to the online discourse to note that racialised trans youth die much more frequently, and their deaths are not met with the

[12] This day of mourning acts as a community bonding exercise, which some trans theorists have criticised for using the deaths of primarily trans women of colour (TWoC) to bolster trans-homonationalism. This demonstration of nectropolitics makes TWoC an acceptable sacrifice for political agitation that mostly benefits white trans people, e.g. campaigning for more hate crime legislation, contributing to a prison industrial complex which disproportionately targets PoC like Black trans women (Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013, Bhanji, 2018).

same level of attention and outrage as white trans subject such as Alcorn (and by extension Ghey).

3.9 Summary of UK trans youth social media research

To date, very little research has been conducted with trans youth in the UK on the topic of their social media experience. Jenzen (2017) found that trans youth (16-26 years old) carefully curated the online media they consumed and explained reading against the grain for content they recognised as problematic. This supports Kennedy's (2021) concept of agentic learning with evidence of trans youth setting their own curriculum. Jenzen (2017, p.1639) also recognised "the mundane yet persistent resistance" of trans youth against "mainstream paradigms" in a way that centres their day-to-day experience online, rather than the more common focus on transition narratives alone. However, Jenzen's study was limited by being localised to a trans youth group in Brighton, meaning the results may represent mostly well-supported, urban-based trans youth compared to a wider sample.

In a research project on LGBT+ students (20-34 years old), which included identifiably distinct trans data (20-24 years old), Talbot et al. (2020) examined university students' identity management on social media. Whilst as a whole LGBT+ students were found to use social media to "explore, conceal, protect and express their identities" (Talbot et al. 2020, p.1735), in addition, trans students in particular reported receiving hostile comments regarding their identity, as detailed in the previous section on trans youth online harassment.

Cronesberry & Ward (2024) examined the role of social media in identity development for UK gender-diverse young adults, with participants (19-25 years old) recruited online. It was found that participants: curated their social media to enforce safety boundaries, wouldn't have worked out their identities without social media and were active participants in developing new language to describe trans experiences. It was also concluded that some spaces are more suited to the early stage of trans identity development than indefinite participation. This data demonstrates UK trans youth using their agency to co-construct knowledge as a part of a community curriculum for identity work (in line with findings such as Schudson and Van Anders, 2019), in addition to driving their own agentic curriculum (Kennedy, 2021).

There does not appear to be existing UK research on this topic with participants under 19 years old who are not localised to a single physical data collection venue. This is significant as a gap in the literature as young trans people who are less able to attend face-to-face interviews may value and experience social media differently.

Existing UK research is mostly focused on identity work, with the exception of Jenzen (2017). Whilst identity work is undoubtedly an important use of social media for trans youth, the relative neglect of trans experience beyond transition itself contributes to a cisnormative assumption of post-transition assimilation away from trans-specific subjecthood.

4. Framework

This thesis approaches the experiences of trans youth on social media from the perspective of trans affect theory informed by theoretical work on publics, commons and digital intimacies.

4.1 Trans Theory

Transgender (Trans) Theory does not represent a monolith of trans thought, as demonstrated in the literature review above, there is a wide range of conflicting discourse within trans communities, and there is debate as to whether there can be such a thing as a singular trans theory. Unlike queer theory, which defines itself in opposition to norms, trans theory must hold space for the variety in trans experiences of not just subversive but also normative gender and sexuality experiences, as not all trans people identify as queer or are "readable" as trans (Jones, 2021). Likewise, whilst transgender theory acknowledges the role of social construction in gender formation and expression, it also makes space for self-constructed, embodied, and experienced gender formations beyond the pre-existing societal conceptions of masculinity and femininity queer theory is defined in defiance of (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). This complexity makes trans theory more practical than queer theory for applying to the complex lives of trans people for the purposes of research[13], but also makes it more difficult to pin down its central tenets.

Haulotte (2023, p.32) defines trans theory as the "tension between discursive analyses of cisgender society and phenomenological descriptions of trans experience" with the aim of "the systematic development of the trans archive." To justify a common trans project in the face of such diversity of experience, Haulotte puts forward an argument for trans existentialism, that the unity of trans people lies in a common situation, the "alienation and unfreedom" of being subjected to cisgender society[14], rather than a common experience of gender or its intersects.

In summary, trans theory is the examination of the variety of trans experience unified by the common impositions cisgender society makes on trans lives.

---

[13] Examined further in the Methodology chapter.

[14] And therefore, a common responsibility to fight for liberation and neutralise cisgender society, ending the trans-cis distinction altogether.

4.2 Affect Theory

Affect here refers to anything regarding emotional experience, including pre/unconscious responses that cannot be neatly labelled or explained (Figlerowicz, 2012). Affect theory, much like trans theory, has many different approaches and interpretations. I will be focusing on queer and feminist affect theory, which centres the opportunities presented by negative and non-normative affects experienced in the face of what is promised, by neoliberal cisheteronormative patriarchy, as "The good life" (Berlant, 2011).

Ahmed (2010b) has written at length on the topic of affective experiences that run counter to normative affective expectations, resulting in becoming an "affect alien". For example, when everyone at a table is laughing at a sexist joke except one person, the person who is not amused and does not laugh is affectively alienated from the others. This is a component of what Ahmed describes as becoming a "feminist killjoy": the affect alien, in addition to not finding happiness in sexism themselves, acts to disrupt others' sexist "fun", thus killing their joy. In this way, it is possible to see how negative affect can be viewed as having radical potential. That is not to say that negative affect is the only orientation that is politically valuable, by the same token, positive affective orientations that are non-normative or judged to be "inappropriate" also have radical potential, as Ahmed outlines on the topic of queer happiness:

> "The queer who is happily queer still encounters the world that is unhappy with queer love, but refuses to be made unhappy by that encounter. I have argued that the risk of promoting happy queers is that the unhappiness of this world can disappear from view. To be happily queer can also recognize that unhappiness; indeed to be happily queer can be to recognize the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity." (Ahmed, 2010a, p.117)

Thus, the affect alien may have a negative affective orientation towards aspects of normativity that are supposed to be positive and a positive affective orientation to things that they are discouraged from by normative forces. This alienation from normativity makes the examination of affect a critical aspect of studying any marginalised group, including trans people.

4.2.1 Trans Affect Theory

In recent years, trans theorists have begun to utilise affect theory, as it affords working with the many ways that negative affect commonly appears in trans experience without having to use a pathologising framework. For example, Malatino (2022) argues:

> ”Moving bad feelings to the center of a discussion of what, if anything, might link or be shared by disparate trans subjects is a way of reorienting the way trans experience is thought; it becomes less about a diagnosis, less about dysphoria, less about our personal relation to embodiment and transition, and instead about more or less shared affective orientations and habituations to relentlessly quotidian, hydra-headed forms of transantagonism.” (Malatino, 2022, p.11)

This approach to trans affects meshes with Haulotte’s (2023) trans existentialism that focuses on shared alienation rather than individual struggle. It also follows that, just as there are ways to experience transness that are not necessarily queer, there are trans affects that are not automatically translated into radical or useful responses. Crawford (2008) builds on Cvetkovich (1992) in explaining this:

> **“…**while the personal may be political, the political is not necessarily subversive. Thus, the affective experience of transgender may always be political, but the narratives we craft from these affects, and the actions we take in response to them, are not always or obviously resistant.” (Crawford, 2008, p.131)

Awkward-Rich (2022) provides an example of this in the history of the anger expressed by many trans activists and their allies when insisting that being trans is not a form of sickness in the service of arguing that trans people should be listened to regarding their own lives. This anger at being associated with sickness foreclosed on solidarity with the disabled and mentally ill, and thus the opportunity to take a position “against the premise that sanity/health indexed by the absence of bad feeling should be necessary to secure the authority of minoritarian subjects” (Awkward-Rich, 2022, p.3). It is, therefore, critical to analyse common themes in trans affect and the narratives that travel around and within them, as the quality of instinct cannot be assumed, even if it is shared.

It is difficult to examine existing theories of trans affect without integrating social media, due in part to the history of trans internet use as outlined earlier, and the intensely affective features built into social media platforms, which amplify and preserve emotive communications. To address this, it is necessary to spend some time with political,

structural and affective theorising around social media before returning to ways in which trends in trans affect are currently understood.

4.3 Publics

Habermas (1962) conceptualised the "public sphere" as the social production and circulation of discourses, separate from the state, in which political debate can occur and lead to the democratic formation of public opinion. Rather than one public sphere, Warner (2002) formulated multiple publics as performed articulations dependent on the presence of strangers and co-produced through active uptake. Online mediated communication has enabled not only ease of production and participation in myriad publics, but the affordances of digital media, particularly social media, has led to those publics becoming highly interconnected into what Boyd (2011) terms "networked publics".

4.3.1 Networked Counterpublics

Technology optimists hailed early social media as a global town square, providing everyone a voice in the public sphere (Dean, 2003). This was an extension of the existing bourgeois public sphere discourse that making social inequalities invisible in deliberation would lead to participatory parity (Fraser, 1990). Unfortunately, the power structures present AFK do not cease to exist on the internet; the same inequalities can be seen reproduced in digital spaces (Galpin, 2022). Fraser (1990) published her concept of subaltern counterpublics before this naive optimism regarding the internet could be borne out; however, it is a concept seemingly ideally demonstrated by social media.

Subaltern counterpublics are alternative publics created by groups who are not represented in the dominant public and can be tools of political agency for marginalised groups who are otherwise the subject of malicious misinformation and hostile narratives (Fraser, 1990). Writing before the internet became widely available, Fraser uses examples such as feminist bookshops and lecture series; these were vital in facilitating feminist counterpublics and agitating for social change but, by modern standards, had extremely limited reach.

To incorporate the concepts of networked publics and the subaltern counterpublic, Jackson & Foucault Welles (2015) use the term "networked counterpublics" to capture how highly connected, fast, and widely spread online counterpublic content can be. The

most notable recent examples of networked counterpublics are the #MeToo (Trott, 2021) and #BLM (Black Lives Matter) (Alfonzo, 2021) hashtags on Twitter (now X) and other social media platforms, beginning as activist-driven hashtags in the US, growing to widespread international use, and eventually being recognised by the dominant public. The mass AFK political agitating that accompanied the spread of these hashtags, which were themselves filmed and posted on social media, is evidence of the fundamental flaw in an online/offline dichotomy.

4.3.2 Trans Networked Counterpublics

As already established, before the internet, outside of academia, trans counterpublics had a limited range of magazines, newsletters and face-to-face meetings, much like, and sometimes overlapping with, the feminist counterpublics Fraser described. With the advent of social media, a networked trans counterpublic became possible. In 2012, Janet Mock started the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs on Twitter (now X) to show solidarity to other trans women and bring attention to the issues they face, the hashtag gained popularity among a wide network of trans women and developed into a "trans counterpublic that provides life-affirming support to trans women online and that actively engages U.S. culture and national politics" (Jackson et al. 2018). In their analysis of this network, Jackson et al. found trans women using social media seamlessly for both internal community support and external activism (as mentioned in the literature review), the publicness of the hashtag being inherent to its function.

The rise of networked trans counterpublics followed the decline of AFK trans support groups in the late 1990s as trans people began to find what they needed online. Traditional AFK trans organisers such as Jane Cresap warned at the time of the dangers of relying on the goodwill of online platforms as "their current sense of acceptance could vanish should 'the cyber police deem us unfit for the internet'" (Dame-Griff, 2023). This is no less the case today for example, with the passing of the US-proposed Kids Online Safety Act and/or the UK's recently passed Online Safety Bill, the *public* aspect of networked trans counterpublics could be threatened (Reed, 2023, Stonewall, 2021).

Aside from the precarity of ongoing access to social media for use as a public by marginalised groups, Barassi (2015) expands on the necessity of combining social media and AFK environments for protest, arguing that the speed and volume of social media

content creates a large number of “weak ties”, people then need the space and time afforded by AFK interaction to develop ideas and strengthen bonds.

Cross (2024) goes further than this and argues that whilst social media has useful affordances for making connections between minorities such as trans people, it is not itself a site that facilitates political change, due to the capitalist imperative of the platform owners to keep users engaged in individualistic ways that feel collective but aren’t, such as arguing with users who post hateful content, which she points out, serves only to boost engagement for the offender’s account and on the platform in general, a positive outcome for everyone but the targeted community. Cross insists instead the true work of organising must be taken elsewhere, places not necessarily AFK, but less public so as not to be at the mercy of the individualistic attention economy that drives open platforms.

4.4 Sociology of Algorithms

A feature of most social media that is fundamental to their business model and, therefore, the above critique of their political usefulness, is their use of algorithms. When discussing algorithms in the context of online experience, beyond the basic definition of a set of rules for calculations, “algorithms” is used as a shorthand for “machine learning algorithms”, the collection of datasets and making of predictions based on the patterns found within them (Kelleher, 2019, p.253).

One of the key developments in the move from discrete websites of Web 1.0 to the social media of Web 2.0 was the adoption of the endless feed of content as the hallmark of all major platforms. In this feed model, algorithms can push content to users along with content from accounts they subscribe to. Feeds with promoted content ensure that users never “finish” consuming content and can stay engaged and scrolling indefinitely (Lupinacci, 2021). Variations of this are also seen on platforms that do not have scrollable feeds, such as YouTube’s autoplay feature for algorithmically linked content. The machine learning algorithms designed, owned, and used by different platforms are individual and proprietary, differing both between each other and internally through time. Whilst it is not a prerequisite of these algorithms that they maximise the time users spend on the platforms they operate on, it *is* inherent to platform capitalism. The business logic of maximising user engagement time is that it also maximises both user

exposure to adverts and the amount of user data that can be gathered and subsequently sold on (Dobson et al. 2018). Thus, although these algorithms are black boxes due to how their owners keep their exact nature opaque to outsiders (both users and researchers), it is assumed that they are designed to maximise profitability by both using personalisation to keep the user engaged and/or by collecting and selling on user data (Carroll et al. 2022).

One effect observed to commonly result from algorithmically driven content is the propensity towards "filters", that is, once an algorithm has profiled a user for their specific interests and characteristics, filtering the content promoted to that user for those specific niches, resulting in a highly personalised bubble. One contentious filter bubble example is the theory that YouTube uses algorithms that have a bias towards extreme content that funnels users down "rabbit holes" of radicalisation towards conspiracy theories and the far-right (Ledwich et al. 2022). Agency and autonomy then become key questions about social media, as algorithms personalise platform content independent of (but crucially, not necessarily contrary to) conscious user intent. Alderman (2024, p.16) refers to this as the "algorithmic undertow", that is, the "subtle, often unconscious pull of digital systems on attention, belief, and behavior". The concept of the algorithmic undertow is useful for working with algorithms as a significant force without being fully deterministic. Alderman (2024) suggests that the power of the undertow on the individual is dependent on how aware users are of it, and their mindfulness in resistance (in addition to collective and structural factors).

There has been some research into users' awareness and resistance to algorithms. Due to the information asymmetry of users not having access to how algorithms work but algorithms having access to all user data, algorithms often give the impression of "knowing" users to a degree that can be considered "creepy" when they appear to know too much (Chun, 2016), or frustrating when they seem to know too little. In other words, it is when they are not operating as expected that algorithms are the most visible (Airoldi, 2021); so platform changes (or assumed changes) to algorithms tend to garner user attention, even when they aren't informed of what they are.

As algorithms are integral to the experience of social media platforms, users with a degree of digital literacy tend to develop folk theories (Devito, 2022) or gossip (Bishop,

2019) about how the algorithms work (especially if they are invested in promoting their online visibility, such as activists, artists, and professional "content creators"); theories which are eternally up for debate due to the fluid and opaque nature of platform algorithms. One commonly-held algorithmic folk theory is that platforms use algorithms to "shadow ban" accounts posting undesirable (but not rule-violating) content, by deprioritising and "burying" it (Savolainen, 2022), a practice denied by all social media platforms, but the folk theory is a stubborn one tied to accusations of political suppression (Paul, 2023). Research on algorithmic folk theories tends to be platform-specific, as folk theories help to make up users' sense of "platform spirit", the overall character that users attribute to the platform. For example, DeVito (2022) looked at US and UK transfeminine TikTok creators and found they had theories of "doors and traps of visibility" created by the algorithm.

Alderman (2024) takes Bhaskar's (2002) critical realist position of "absence as an active force in social reality" and applies it to the relationship between humans and algorithms. Alderman uses this to theorise around the role of algorithmic "demi-realities" of filter bubbles in the polarisation of society, algorithms which necessarily exclude as they include as a part of the curation process. But what happens when algorithms try to absent you from your own reality? Simpson & Semann (2021), found that LGBTQ+ users of TikTok had to communicate on other platforms or AFK to get tips on how to work around its apparently heteronormative algorithm, that otherwise devalues and hides (shadow bans) the LGBTQ+ content they want to see. This is just one example of "algorithmic resistance" (Karizat et al. 2021) in which users not only develop folk theories about what algorithms are doing and what this means about platform spirit (e.g. the algorithm shadow bans LGBTQ+ content thus the platform is queerphobic) but then devise and share ways to subvert algorithmic pathways. As Simpson & Semann (2021) found, this process is not bound to the platform in question, so it is important not to conceptualise queer networks as bound to a single platform, or as strictly online, as their creators are not.

4.5 Social Media and Affect

Theories of counterpublics have been criticised for inadvertently upholding the patriarchal concept of a public/private dichotomy by overlooking the affective components of subaltern content production. Affect has historically also been neglected

in examinations of online communication, in a continuation of the concept of it as a sphere of pure discourse. Stark (2018, p.54) also argues that a lack of established language around the affective experience of relating to digital technology makes it difficult to analyse: “Drawing out the ties between our private selves, our feelings, and the devices we use every day is difficult precisely because these embodied connections have often been felt, but not articulated.” That the speed of development and uptake of social media vastly outstrips the rate at which its effects are robustly studied is the story of digital technology more generally.

However, since the controversial 2014 study in which Facebook partnered with Cornell University to purposefully manipulate some of its users’ emotional states, there has been a rising awareness of the role affect plays in the design of social media platforms, and their business models (Sampson et al. 2018); with this understanding, any framework for examining social media experiences must account for affect.

4.5.1 Affective Publics

To acknowledge the role of affect in the political potential of social media Papacharissi (2015) writes in terms of “affective publics”. Papacharissi focuses on the immediacy afforded by scrolling platform feeds such as X (formerly Twitter), which enables emotive, emergent storytelling (Dawson, 2020). Marginalised produsers can create instant, networked narratives out of events that then stir empathy, e.g. the Arab Spring hashtag.

Lünenborg (2019) elaborates on the temporal aspect of affective publics that create “affective flows” of sociality, e.g. “shit storms”, in which a high volume of high-emotion content concentrates around one story or figure before moving on. This is exemplified by the memetic figure of the “main character of the day” on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) (Maple Cocaine, 2019; Johnson, 2022). This bears a resemblance to Whannel’s concept of the “vortextuality” of news (Whannel, 2010), originally coined to describe intense news media cycles around one focal point, but with audiences and affect taking a much more active role in their formation and trajectory. A trans-youth-specific example would be the anger that flowed through social media posts about Leelah Alcorn’s death (Karamshuk et al. 2017).

Although these conceptualisations of affective publics fold affect into networked publics and counterpublics, they still focus on externally-facing activism and/or extreme events

in such a way that does not provide a framework for the day-to-day public intimacies of social media experience. Continuing the theme of liquid dynamics and weather analogies common in both affect and social media theory: hurricanes, twisters, and tsunamis garner more attention than the banality of the ambient climate that makes up most people's daily experience. The banalities of affective publics are also worthy of analysis as "ordinary affects", as defined by Stewart (2007), which "begin and end in broad circulation" but are also part of our "intimate lives", as such, it is the flow of ordinary affects which shape our lives.

4.5.2 Intimate publics and counterintimacies

Existing across counterpublics, affect, and daily life, Berlant developed the concept of intimate publics and counterintimacies (Berlant and Warner, 1998). Berlant (1998, p.284) outlines intimacy as "the kind of connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend on for living" (emphasis original). In the same essay, they make a specification that can be used as a distinction between the affective and the intimate public: intimacy is performed as "an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it' (Berlant, 1998, p.285). Affective publics are emotive without necessitating belonging, whereas intimate publics imply emotion (which may or may not be present) in the way they demonstrate connection through a common scene of identification and worldbuilding.

Whilst there are many forms of intimacy, Berlant & Warner (1998) argue that intimacy has been privatised by heterosexual culture to appear apolitical, much like the feminist critique of the separation of the public and private sphere covered previously. Through this privatization, imagined "right and normal" modes of ideal heterosexual intimacy create "an extremely narrow context for living" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p.556); heteronormativity shapes what is legible as intimate. In this context, queer culture has developed counterintimacies, intimacies that exist outside of, and therefore are held in subordinate relation to, heteronormative institutions of domesticity, "the couple", kinship etc.

Berlant and Warner (1998) describe physical sites where queer counterintimacies are created as a part of queer worldbuilding, such as the development of safe sex practices in gay clubs and cruising grounds, and argue that such spaces (and, as a result,

intimacies) are fragile due to not being supported by heteronormative institutions. This makes counterintimacies vulnerable to initiatives to drive queer life out of public space, such as zoning laws to keep “adult” businesses far apart and away from “pure” places such as churches and schools. This fragility can also be seen in digital counterintimacies, as exemplified in the aforementioned legislation in the US and UK, nominally regarding “online safety”, that jeopardise online trans publics.

4.5.3 Digital intimate publics

Despite their original formulation in the context of physical space, intimate publics and counterintimacies are frameworks that have been utilised by various digital scholars for examining social media because “The labour of intimacy sustains the business model of social media platforms” (Dobson et al. 2018, p.13). Dobson et al. (2018) theorise that the free intimacy labour people perform on social media for the creation of digital intimacy has a normative power, as performing “authentic” digital intimacy “correctly” through digital literacy can build up intimacy capital. This potential to build capital into the “good life” of reciprocated intimacy is what keeps people engaged with social media. They suggest that marginalised people are more likely to violate normative digital intimacy rules in the form of “intimacy glitches”: occasions of “oversharing” or being “excessive”, which result in being shamed. As a response to this pathologisation of non-normative digital intimacies, Dobson et al. (2018) call for a “radical shamelessness” that expands ethics of care to people whose intimacies are shunned in normative digital publics.

Complicating this, as we have seen, it is not only human actors that contribute to digital environments and, therefore, intimacies; algorithms play a role as well. To acknowledge this Paasonen et al. (2023) take Berlant’s work on intimacy and ambiguity (Berlant, 2022) and apply it to social media. They argue that algorithms form an “infrastructure of intimacy” on social media that “amplifies and steers” the desires and behaviours of human actors, this is similar to Alderman’s (2024) “algorithmic undertow” but with a focus on affect rather than “attention, belief and behaviour”. Dobson et al. (2018) incorporate algorithms into their analysis as an additional normative force for this reason. Paasonen et al. (2023) broaden the vulnerability of counterintimacies from the risk that they can be destroyed by institutional erasure, to the added personal vulnerability of sharing personal data using infrastructure that is at least partly opaque,

and the associated risks, such as context collapse. However, as Dobson et al. (2018) note, the way social media algorithms customise content to maximise attention can enable a wider array of non-dominant intimacies, creating one of many paradoxes in digital public intimacy.

In assessing the conflicting costs and benefits of digital intimacy, while other critics encourage users, particularly those from marginalised groups, to step away from social media (e.g. Cross, 2024), Paasonen et al. (2023) recognise what Berlant (2022) called "the inconvenience paradox of dependency" in how most people experience social media. Whereas approaches based on techno-exceptionalism would hold that the ambivalence in social media experience is unique, Paasonen et al. (2023) attest that the mundanity of techno-social worldbuilding is both inconvenient and vital in different ways, much like life itself. This intimate ambivalence and mundane inconvenience are important to examine because, just as with ordinary affects, it is here that worldmaking occurs.

4.6 Trans Affective Commons

The concept of "the common" is similar to, but distinct from, counterpublics in that it too provides a model of a space where marginalised people can show solidarity, but it also recognises all aspects of life as being intertwined and resistant to false segregations such as public/private, logical/*emotional* etc. (Majewska, 2021). In this way, the common is useful not only for integrating affect but also for challenging the segregation of online/offline.

Working with the concept of the common as being more compatible with affect than counterpublics, Malatino (2022) refers to a "trans affective commons", in which trans subjects are bonded through "the circulation, resonance, and amplification of negative affect between trans subjects" the purpose of which is to make "living with such difficult-to-endure feelings more bearable" (Malatino, 2022, p.9). Malatino names and focuses on fatigue, numbness, envy, rage and burnout as common trans affects that have utility as technologies of survival, care and resistance.

An issue with the concept of the trans affective commons when limiting the scope of discussion to social media is that the platforms where these affects circulate are privately

owned and enclosed, which erodes the egalitarian agency of the common (Dobson et al. 2018) and contributes to their fragility.

4.6.1 t4t commoning

Bost & Hanan (2023) propose an intervention to square the utopic notion of the common with the neoliberal reality of most modern spaces by proposing "commoning" as a verb for actions that contribute to aspirational worldmaking of interdependence and a shared sense of community (Bost & Hanan 2023). With this addition, Bost & Hanan (2023, p.3) offer "the concepts of counter-intimacies and commoning as a way to think about how counterpublics might work towards building anticapitalist solidarities". In this framework, commoning practices are how counterintimacies are built. Of course, as established in the previous introduction to trans theory, trans people are diverse in experience and outlook, so by no means will all trans people be interested in building solidarities, and those who do are unlikely to limit their social media activity to commoning practices alone.

To talk about the diverse and ambivalent reality of trans worldbuilding, it is necessary to incorporate "t4t" realism. Originating as an online dating category, t4t is short for "trans for trans", and whilst it began as a descriptor for a romantic/sexual practice, it has been broadened to a "subcultural ethos" of separatist care (Awkward-Rich & Malatino, 2022). That is, a commitment to looking after other trans people, even those you do not know or like. As a world-making practice, t4t is at risk of being over-idealised in a way that ignores the conflict and harm that can happen between trans subjects, especially if differing positions of power and other intersections are ignored (Marvin, 2022). Many trans academics such as Malatino (2022), Awkward-Rich (2022) and Marvin (2022) have been inspired by the fiction of Torrey Peters on the theme of t4t, particularly her novella *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* (Peters, 2016), as it represents a realist t4t that is full of problems, but still achieves a great deal of good in a group who are often abandoned by wider society.

Whilst I will make liberal use of Malatino's theorising on trans negative affect, I have found it more appropriate to speak in terms of (t4t) commoning, trans counterintimacies and affective publics than "trans affective commons" when working in the specific context of social media. This is to account for the vulnerability of this medium to the

whims of corporate power but also to acknowledge the user capacity for agentic circumvention and resistance. The justification for this can be seen, not only in the past examples of internet companies enforcing a kind of virtual zoning to suppress and segregate trans message boards (Dame-Griff, 2023), but also in recent developments, such as changes in Meta community guidelines to permit trans and LGB+ existence to be described in hateful and pathologizing ways (Booth, 2025)[15]. This fluidity (Papacharissi, 2015) and (cis)heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner 1998) of digital infrastructure make trans counterintimacies doubly fragile. However, from the history of trans internet use through to recent years, trans people, including youth, have demonstrated creative resilience in the face of this fragility (Whittle, 1998; Jenzen, 2017; Dame-Griff, 2023).

To summarise the established framework, affective publics refer to flows of emotive content that do not require identification or attachment (and as such, in a social media context, include empathetic reposting and allyship/solidarity posts). Whereas intimate publics are displays of connection through common recognition and reference that imply, but do not require, emotion (e.g. trans vocabulary for trans-specific experiences). Just as the dominant public has counterpublics, the dominant intimate public of (cis/white/abled)heteronormativity has counterintimacies in which, unlike the invisible nature of normative intimacy practices, non-normative intimacies are hypervisible and persist against, if not active hostility, then a lack of widespread support. Commons cannot truly exist in increasingly privatised neoliberal environments such as most social media platforms, but the action of commoning, aspirational world-building towards an interdependent community, is always possible to attempt. It is these attempts that contribute to counterintimacies.

4.6.2 Unliveability in trans counterintimacies and affective publics

Examples of trans counterintimacies and affective publics can be seen throughout social media and have a long tradition online. Many of the most notable examples centre on trans death; for example, the already mentioned yearly TDoR, and the individual cases of Leelah Alcorn and Brianna Ghey.

[15] Indicative of broad corporate abandonment of DEI commitments following the economic tides of the culture war (Paresh & Elliott, 2025).

The intensity of the anger that was expressed regarding Alcorn's parents' behaviour and the continued existence of "conversion therapy" practices, is an example of what Malatino (2022, p.16) calls an "infrapolitical ethics of care": the networked community practices that "empathically witness and amplify rage, as well as support subjects during and after moments of grappling with overwhelming negative affect." In this case, it was too late to support Leelah, but it was possible to amplify her anger and attempt to honour her wish for her death to "mean something" towards "fixing society" for trans youth. Here, the witnessing of rage and grief through digital counterintimacies of t4t commoning can simultaneously be emotively amplified as a wider affective public, garnering and utilising external allies for the purposes of political agitating.

In their analysis of collective negative trans affect, *Unliveable Lives*, Westbrook (2020), like Malatino, posits that the trans community is bound by negativity but, contrary to Malatino's framing of the positive potential of this negativity, argues that the building of modern trans activism around violent death (i.e. TDoR) has led to a "wounded subjectivity" in which trans group membership is felt to be based on vulnerability to violence (Westbrook, 2020, p.15), leaving no space for joy in trans subjecthood and thus rendering trans lives inherently unliveable. "Unliveable" here is used in the Butlerian (Butler, 1993) sense of "constant fear without hope for change", resulting in "a situation that does not allow for a fully human life as we understand *human* and thus is unlivable as a human", rather than un-survivable (Westbrook, 2020, p.210).

Westbrook sees a major obstacle to making space for trans joy and liveable lives to be the interaction between identity politics and the neoliberal market that insists on scarcity and competition over solidarity, meaning the vulnerability of trans subjects has to be promoted above all else if the issues trans people face are to get any traction in the "social problems marketplace" (Westbrook, 2020, p.6). Cross (2024) argues that this is especially the case for trans people on social media where, if they don't spend enough time in their AFK community (whether out of fear or lack of opportunity), the stream of trans hostility and bad news can make a liveable life seem out of reach.

Using the above framework, this could be said to be one of the risks of affective publics operating under neoliberal logics in the same spaces as counterintimacies, especially with no signposted boundaries between them. Empathy is a scarcity that makes positive or even neutral trans affects uncompetitive in the social problems marketplace, driving

trans joy and trans liveability out of prominent view. This is probably only one factor in a complex relationship between various publics and machines. Algorithmic infrastructure and its bias towards extremes to maximise engagement (Dobson et al. 2018) may also play a role.

This emphasis on trans negative affect contrasts with concern about queer filter bubbles being unrealistically utopic, when compared with the hostility of AFK life. In discussing the consuming nature of queer online spaces, specifically Tumblr, Cavalcante (2020) expands Whannel's (2010) concept of vortextuality to apply it to intense periods of engagement with social media filter bubbles. In doing so Cavalcante primarily maintained the concept of the queer bubble as a comfortable and happy place, with acknowledgement that it is also possible to become absorbed in tangential negative vortexes, such as self-harm content. This vortextuality is used by Cavalcante to describe the allure of the positive affect produced by engaging with the flurry of content in siloed networks of "queer utopias" on Tumblr, where hostility to LGBT+ people has no place, and where algorithms are presumed to reinforce these safe-space vortexes. This concept of queer vortextuality appears to transfer to younger platforms than Tumblr that are more algorithm-driven, such as TikTok (Jennings, 2023). However, research focusing on the potential issues with queer vortexes remains on them being utopic echo chambers. This raises the question of whether trans counterintimacies have a distinctly different, more negative, affective quality than broader queer networks, as Westbrook, Malatino and Cross suggest, but still show this tendency towards vortextuality.

4.7 Paranoid and depressive reading

Having established the theoretical framework within which this study is working, it is now necessary to detail the orientation from which this framework is approached. A long-established association with negative affect and critical thought is problematic for those who desire knowledge production to go hand-in-hand with hope for change. To address this, Sedgwick (1997) developed the paranoid and depressive positions, as described in psychoanalysis, into differing vantages for interpretation.

In examining paranoid reading, Sedgwick focused on the affective experience of being constantly orientated towards new information about how one is oppressed; the anxious belief that one can never be paranoid enough. Whilst suspicion, anxiety and

paranoia can all be said to be negative affects, Sedgwick argues that the paranoid position is also a denial of affect, pursuing facts and truth rather than sitting with the negative emotions of what is already known. She contends that whilst the paranoid position may not be able to prevent bad news from happening, it does defend from it coming as a nasty surprise, arguing that in the paranoid position, it is worse for such attacks "to be unanticipated than often to be unchallenged" (Sedgwick, 1997, p.12). This impossibility of surprise also shuts down the possibility of hope, which is inherently uncertain. This lack of hope leads to Love's (2010, p.237) depiction of the paranoid person as "both aggressive and wounded, knowing better but feeling worse, lashing out from a position of weakness."

Several theorists have used Sedgwick's Paranoid position to describe the way queer people approach social media (Heggestad, 2021, Conrad & Pelletier, 2022), that is the assumption of the worst possible interpretation as a form of self-defence against bad (all) surprises. Johnson (2022) diagnoses paranoia as a feature of being "too online", regardless of demographic, and identifies "paranoid posting" as a preoccupation with how posts will be received. This is concordant with the logics of paranoid reading, as it expects one's posts will be read with the same filter of worst interpretation that others are read.

In contrast to the paranoid position, Sedgwick describes the depressed position as also involving anxiety, but about what you may have done to others and the unintended consequences of your actions (Love, 2010), as well as the sadness that comes with a nuanced position that empathises with both good and bad in everyone. This depressed position becomes the basis of reparative reading, in which the good in something can be acknowledged without erasing the bad and vice versa. Sedgwick emphasises that both paranoid and depressive readings are valid bases for knowledge, but when only one is used, opportunities for different types of knowledge are missed.

In looking specifically at trans negative affect, Awkward-Rich (2022) took Sedgwick's use of the depressive position and integrated arguments from disability studies, focusing on Siebers' (2008) accounting for the reality of pain regardless of societal accommodation,

to outline the concept of the "depressed transsexual[16] position"; "To read like a depressed transsexual, then, is to read from a position both committed to the idea that trans lives are "lived, hence livable" while also taking feeling bad as sometimes a mundane fact." (Awkward-Rich, 2022, p.74)

Mundane negativity as liveable differs from unlivable wounded subjecthood in its unexceptional nature. This orientation thus arguably prevents the conclusion of a moral imperative towards a dancing-plague-style toxic positivity of compulsory trans joy in the face of hardship as the only alternative to wounded paranoia. As Cvetkovich (2012) establishes, depression is "domestic because it is ordinary". Both Awkward-Rich (2022) and Malatino (2022) attend to domestic forms of negative trans affect, countering the false binary of trans joy or an unliveable life by sitting with its ordinariness.

4.7.1 Reading digital trans counterintimacies and affective publics like a depressed transsexual

In my previous research looking at how trans youth tweeted about mental health crises on Twitter (now X) (Simms, 2020), I found trans youth who were acutely aware of the impact their deaths, and by contrast, their lives, could have on an imagined public:

> "When ya wanna die but wanna live past 30 to prove that you can survive despite what the stats say about trans kids" -18 yr old trans man

I would argue that to negotiate feeling a t4t obligation to defy a narrative of tragedy, whilst nevertheless feeling suicidal, with social media content that simultaneously contributes to an affective public *and* signals to a trans counterintimacy that they are suffering and require support, is a more sophisticated response than it initially appears, addressing multiple publics at once.

Trans counterintimacies and affective publics are therefore conceived of here as a framework expansive enough for the multi-layered communication practices of online

[16] Whilst "transsexual" fell out of common parlance some years ago in favour of the broader and more sanitised "transgender", there has been a recent resurgence in use of the older term amongst some trans people for various reasons beyond the prevue of this thesis. When a trans writer has used this term, I will honour this usage. However when analysing participant data I will use the shortened "depressed trans position" to refer to this concept, as I am unable to know whether individual participants would be comfortable with the word "transsexual" being used in reference to their words.

trans experience, including the social, affective, infrapolitical and overtly political, in permutations that overlap and shift in emphasis depending on the audience.

This is not a utopic model free of interference and risk, due to platforms run in the interests of capital over the interests of users, the presence of hostile actors and the potential for maladaptive reactions. This, combined with current AFK sources of negativity for UK trans youth, as covered in the background context, is counterbalanced by the established benefits of social media use for trans people to learn, support each other and do activism, as well as a rare source of relative agency. It is thus necessary to apply this framework from the nuanced and grounded orientation of depressed trans reading, which can sit with the ambivalence of digital intimacy and acknowledge the reality of "wanna die but wanna live" as a coherent and legible subject position.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has contextualised the current study by first describing the current sociopolitical environment in the UK for trans people in general, then youth in particular. Due to the relative lack of borders online, the history of trans internet use was then addressed from the perspective of English-language content rather than nation of origin.

Current literature on trans youth, trans adult and LGBT+ youth experiences with social media was reviewed. A number of prominent themes emerged from these studies, suggesting social media can be highly valuable for identity work, possibility modelling, education, community building, resources, activism and emotional support for trans youth. As well as useful affordances, social media was also found to come with risks such as context collapse, hostility and harassment.

Having established that, there is a need to understand how trans youth in the UK context experience and negotiate the ambivalence of the risks and benefits of social media. Current UK-specific work is sparse, but what exists points to themes of agentic navigation of a hostile-leaning environment. In a political and cultural landscape in which trans youth are heatedly discussed but not listened to, there is still a significant gap in the literature for their voices.

With the topic of the current study justified, the theoretical framework was introduced. Synthesis of trans affect theory and digital intimate publics led to a framework of digital

trans counterintimacies and affective publics analysed from the position of depressed trans reading. This approach has been developed to be accommodating to the diversity of subjective trans experience and the common cissexist impositions of precarity and injustice borne out through technology in the mundane and the extreme of day-to-day use.

5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline this study's ontological positioning in social constructivism, leading to a research paradigm based in trans theory. Due to the role of the researcher in co-constructing knowledge in this context, reflexivity will be critically reviewed before outlining the author's positionality as a trans researcher. This ontology and paradigm are appropriate for the research questions as they facilitate the construction of narratives from the specific positionality of trans youth.

The method designed as appropriate for use with this research paradigm will then be detailed: conducting asynchronous online focus groups and remote interviews, and the data analysis method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It will conclude with an examination of the ethical issues and considerations of working with trans youth in this way.

5.2 Ontology

Historically, there has been a drive in the social sciences to attempt to match the status of the natural sciences by striving for empiricism from an ontology of positivism: the belief that objective truth is accessible through systematic and rigorous measurement. Such scientism persists (Lee, 2012), but there are also many approaches that have grown out of a scepticism of the possibility of producing objective knowledge, particularly about subjective experiences of the type that the social sciences are concerned with, constructivism being one.

5.2.1 Constructivism

Constructivism is a challenging concept to define due to having different meanings in the wide array of disciplines that use the term, in some contexts being used interchangeably with *constructionism*, and in others being clearly differentiated. For this reason, it is more accurate to refer to *constructivisms* when discussing what has developed under the umbrella of constructivism's common assertion (Pfadenhauer, 2018) that rather than knowledge being the reflection of objective reality,

representations of reality are constructed based on "the observer's interpretation and standpoint" (Knol, 2011)[17].

With their seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger & Luckmann (1966) inspired the development of many *social* constructivisms (despite explicitly distancing themselves from the term). Pfadenhauer (2018) argues that Berger & Luckmann's work can be accurately described as social constructivism due to them conceiving of social reality *and* what is considered "natural" reality as socially constructed, and that this construction is a ceaseless, sociohistorical process. Berger & Luckmann asserted that this does not mean that there is no objective reality, although there are radical constructivist schools who maintain this (Knoblauch & Pfadenhauer, 2023), but rather, reality is interpreted through schemas that are constructed and maintained through human interactions up to the societal level and over eras of time.

Social constructivism as an appropriate basis for a research paradigm for examining social media is a deceptively straightforward argument due to the existence of social media being dependent on socially produced and driven content. Although some theorists argue that the multiple levels of technological mediation (e.g. algorithms and "AI") involved in social media take the construction of its reality away from human autonomy (Couldry & Hepp, 2018), however, this technology contains human biases and desires within its production (Benjamin, 2019). As discussed in the framework section in the previous chapter, online filter bubbles and networked counterintimacies can lead to highly personalised social media environments, depending on demographics and interests, e.g. Black Twitter (Sharma, 2013), BreadTube (Cotter, 2024), BookTok (Low et al. 2025), etc.

Looking beyond the content itself, the way social media platforms are constructed, organised, and governed holds sway over the content and interactions produced (Burgess, 2021). For example, a platform which focuses on image-based content such as Instagram, produces a different content culture to more text-based platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) or Reddit. Due to the specificity of the cultures constructed on each platform, scholars of platform studies, such as Burgess (2021), recommend against

[17] Some references may refer to "constructionism" but are discussed here under the term constructivism if they meet this definition. I will not be discussing the constructionism of developmental/cognitive psychology, which is an individual-level learning model and outside the remit of this thesis.

studying social media as a whole. However, this is assuming the focus of study is the platform itself rather than the user, as users themselves are rarely loyal to a single social media platform. With the focus of study here being the experience of the user, the differing platform contexts and cultures will be aspects of a larger, nuanced digital picture.

The apparent simplicity of the socially constructed nature of social media is troubled by the addition of transgender experience; as described in Glitch Feminism (Russell, 2020), modern trans life blurs the distinction between online and embodied experience. This complexity necessitates a closer examination of social constructivism and gender.

Politically, the framework of social constructivism allowed feminist theorists and activists to challenge the biological essentialism of patriarchal gender roles, e.g. that women "naturally" belonged in the home. It also allowed queer theorists to take stances against the cisheteronormative medical models that linked gender identities and sexualities innately to the binary genders assigned at birth, marking any variance as pathological (Fiaccadori, 2006). Through social constructivism, it was possible to argue against justifications for oppression without having to use the same "objective" knowledge paradigms that established the marginalisation in the first instance, by challenging the validity of their very definition of fact.

Whilst social constructivism has been useful for movements concerning marginalised genders, the extent to which gender itself is constructed, rather than merely knowledge about gender, is an emotive and ongoing point of contention in feminist, queer and trans disciplines.

Sex-essentialist, anti-trans feminists argue that binary sex differences are the objective basis of (socially constructed) sexist oppression (Lavery, 2023), whereas poststructuralists argue that binary sex is also a social construction imposed on a much more complex diversity of features e.g., Butler (1993). Sex-essentialism as the foundation of oppression fails to account for intersectional experiences of oppression along lines such as race, sexuality, and class, and is nihilistic in the inconceivability of change beyond the level of the individual, leading to it being conceptualised as a white, middle-class formulation of feminism (Phipps, 2020).

Conversely, if gender is entirely socially constructed without an immutable core quality, then arguably, John Money, the sexologist who coined the word "gender", would have been correct in his claim that it is possible to change the gender of any baby using medical and social interventions (Gill-Peterson, 2018)[18]. The difference between Money's conceptions of gender and queer theory being that Money was attempting to construct gender in such a way that trans and intersex people could be made to assimilate as neatly as possible into the cisnormative binary as passive, plastic subjects, whereas queer theory posits that the social construction of gender means normative gender roles and identities can be subverted (queered) and self-constructed, providing trans people with agency to transgress the gender binary.

Whilst queer theory is useful for acknowledging genders and sexualities outside of a cisheteronormative paradigm, queer theory creates an identity defined by opposition, without a common core that can be usefully applied to the understanding of individual experience. In this way, it falls short as a tool of analysis in the same ways as sex-essentialist feminism, despite approaching from another direction, as Nagoshi & Bruzuzy (2010, p.434) argue:

> "If multiple oppressed social identities are merely the product of multiple social forces, all of which can be queered, there is no explanation of how individuals navigate these multiple identities, nor is there a basis for using these identities as a source of empowerment for opposing oppression. For example, transgenders' transgressing the gender binary does not by itself constitute an identity from which to oppose the social oppressions that result from that transgression."

Addressing the gap between various abstracted theories about gender and people's experience of gender necessitates confronting the evidence that there is huge variability in what people experience as related to their gender in the first instance: what one person thinks of as inherent to her womanhood may be experienced as entirely gender-neutral by someone else, or masculine by another; it is in such ways that "gender identity is constituted by gender subjectivity" (Ashley, 2023, p.1053). When such varied

[18] A claim disproved by the tragic case of his own patient, David Reimer, who Money conducted male-to-female gender reassignment procedures on as an infant, having convinced Reimer's parents this was the best course of action following a botched circumcision; after years of distress and non-consensual treatments Reimer began social and medical detransition to male as a teenager (Colapinto, 2001).

experiences are the case, the essentialist argument that there is one objectively true way to have and measure gender (sex-based), invalidating all others (experience-based), is an imposition that reifies the experience of a few, whilst denying authority of self-knowledge to everyone else. In turn, queer theory can be just as invalidating in its simplifying and hollowing out of transness to a political position of opposition.

5.2.2 Paradigm: Trans Theory

The framework section of the previous chapter introduced trans theory and how it can be used to unify the diversity of trans experience under the common impositions of a cissexist society (Haulotte, 2023). This orientation towards abundance (Gill-Peterson, 2024) allows for there to be as many ways to be trans as there are trans people, without emptying transness of meaning. Thus, trans theory, in acknowledging the variety in trans experience, emerging from a nuanced constructivist standpoint, requires an open data collection method that allows for a rich narrative, as Nagoshi & Brzusy (2010, p.437) put it:

> "…the autonomous self exists only in relationship to and interactions with these embodied, self-constructed, and socially constructed aspects of identity. In turn, this autonomous self can be understood only in terms of the narrative of one's lived experiences that actively integrates these aspects of identity."

Such integrated lived-experience narratives need not only to be collected but also analysed in a manner that respects their complexity.

Mimesis is the process of constructing a "symbolic world"; when we ask participants to answer qualitative questions, we are asking them to take part in mimesis, to translate their internal experiences into narratives, thus "through reconstructing life by means of particular questions a version of the particular experiences is constructed and interpreted" (Flick, 2004).

In providing the basic scaffolding for these narratives through prompts and questions, and being responsible for their interpretation, researchers are co-creators in mimesis. My mutual trans status with my research participants then becomes an appropriate, and some would argue essential, shared context for co-building a narrative world, not because all trans experience is the same, but because our common situation (existing in a cissexist society) provides the foundation for a mutually legible narrative.

By the same token, it is appropriate to investigate trans experience not just across social media platforms but also how this interacts with AFK life, as this invites a mimesis that approximates the richness and complexity of lived experience.

5.3 Reflexivity

Following this ontological positioning and research paradigm, the role of lived experience in knowledge production is important to reflect on from my position as a researcher. Once the possibility of a truly objective and neutral stance is dismissed, reflexivity is a necessary task in the "acknowledgement that the knower and known cannot be separated" (May, 1999, p.184). It has thus become common practice for qualitative researchers to make positionality statements to account for one's societal location (Kenway & McLeod, 2004) as the position from which knowledge is being produced.

The popularity of the "reflexive turn" in the social sciences in recent decades has not been without critique of some of the ways it has been implemented. It has long been noted that reflexivity that does not substantively engage with the rest of the work risks falling into "vanity reflexivity", in which the author is talking about themselves in a way that serves no apparent purpose (Kenway & McLeod, 2004).

There is also potential for harm in superficial engagement with reflexive practices, for example, Gani & Khan (2024) outline the ways in which positionality statements are often "performative declarations" in "hegemonic contexts" (e.g. white, global-north academia) that can have the opposite of the intended effect and contribute to the reification of colonial knowledge hierarchies. Just as a land acknowledgement made by a white academic on an all-white panel does nothing to decolonise the academy, simply accounting for the demographics one belongs to that differ from one's cohort of study does not neutralise potential power imbalances. This is a critique for researchers who do not share their subjects' marginalised status(es), with the underlying assumption being that reflection on positionality is a tool for more ethically studying the "other". However, the normalisation of positionality statements also puts pressure on marginalised academics to announce their demographics (Gani & Khan, 2024). This can, in turn, become a trap in which personal proximity to the topic is argued to be delegitimising. In the case of trans people, this can be seen in the framing of trans people

as inherently biased activists who are not appropriate researchers for trans topics, as was the reasoning given for the purposeful exclusion of trans input in the Cass Review (Horton, 2024). Robinson (2022) draws further on the similarities between the way racialised people and trans people are othered when they attempt to do community-centred research through the common accusation of "me-search", as a way of pushing it out of consideration by mainstream academia.

The marginalised qualitative researcher thus finds themselves in a dilemma. First, the same issue that all qualitative researchers face, that whilst it is widely accepted that reflexivity is necessary to maximise the methodological and ethical quality of research, the inherent messiness of reflexivity means it is still difficult to identify how to best practice reflexivity to maximise its potential (Alejandro & Stoffel, 2024). Then there is the added problem of being an "outsider within" and having to decide how much to "assimilate a standpoint quite different" to one's own (Collins, 1986, p.s26; Pearce, 2020) to be seen as legitimate by the academy. As Robinson (2022) also points out, a side effect of being denied legitimacy due to one's positionality is the opportunity to produce more radical work. If trans-authored work on trans people is going to be dismissed as inherently biased regardless of how much it complies with conventions of cisnormative knowledge production, there is no motivation to feign distance or objectivity towards the subject or be concerned with cisnormative judgements.

To address the above issues, I have found it necessary to include two very different reflexive pieces. Below, I have used the biographical reflection schema created by Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti (2016) to "critically reflect on the researcher's own biographical entanglements with the research field and their influence on the emergence of data" (Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti, 2016, p.748). This provides structure to keep the reflexive piece strictly engaged with the position I have come to this research from and, therefore, ensures relevancy.

The reflection between data chapters 4 & 5 is a piece of auto-netnography (Villegas, 2018) documenting my social media experience during a leave of absence partway into my write-up (I had only drafted Data Chapter 3) following a bereavement. At this time, the blurring of my own experiences with my data and the inextricable core of transness to both these and my bereavement necessitated I look to a "methodology for the

marginalised" (Pearce, 2020) for survival at the same time as processing this as a valuable lens for my data. This reflexive piece is messy and freeform as it engages with the affective challenges of "we-search" (Winberry & Gray, 2022) in an embattled community. It is placed between data chapters as an intentional disruption, partly as it felt appropriate to place this reflection on the current state of things before the data chapter focused on improved future imaginaries, but also to disrupt any sense of otherness and remove that may have built up in the reader through the data chapters. As a trans person myself, I could relate participant data to an auto-netnography, to provide a detailed single narrative example of many of the themes from previous data chapters to the reader, but also to demonstrate how this experience fed into the development of my theoretical thinking around the data in a powerful transactional relationship that contributed to the resulting mimesis.

The tone of the auto-netnography is deeply personal, which means, as well as being emotive, it overtly foregrounds my political stance on the content I was consuming. This is not done with the intention of persuasion, but because my political interpretations are inherent to my experiences. It is impossible to omit political positioning from the experience of belonging to a demographic that is treated as a political issue in the dominant public, and it would be disingenuous to pretend I am not a politically passionate person, as it contextualises the resulting affect.

The combination of these reflections situates and contextualises my relationship with this project both before and during data collection and analysis.

5.3.1 Biographical Reflection (Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti, 2016)

What personal experience do I have with my research topic?

When I was 15, I got my first internet-connected PC of my own. This also happened to be the age I came out (or rather, was outed) as queer at school. This was 2003, the final year of Section 28, but it was also Kent, whose council adopted its own version of Section 28 until the Equality Act made it illegal in 2010. As a result, in addition to the lack of intervention in the homophobic bullying I experienced, there was no information about sexual and gender diversity in my education.

I remember being on the Queer Youth Alliance[19] (QYA) message board, but I don't remember how I found it in the first place. It was a peer support and activism group in the UK for LGBT+ young people. It was a walled garden where I could interact anonymously with a relatively small group of other LGBT+ youth. This had its pros and cons. The message board was where I learnt what Section 28 was, beyond living in the context of its impact. As well as a space where I could learn about things that were illegal for me to be taught at school, like queer history and sexual health; this was also where activism was organised for opposing Section 28.

Through QYA, I made friends with a butch girl who lived in a nearby town, we began meeting up (in public first), and she was my first introduction to an established AFK network of queer young people. Unfortunately, this was severed when I realised I was bi rather than gay, as in that group biphobia was particularly common and gold star[20] discourse prevailed. This leads to one of the drawbacks of the walled garden: limited variety. During the time I was using the QYA message board, most of the other posters were gay and lesbian cis youth; there certainly weren't any visible non-binary users, as I was not aware of this concept until my 20s. Whilst this group were closer in experience to me than my peers at school, I still didn't have any possibility models.

It was almost 10 years later, in 2012, when I joined Twitter (now X), my first experience of truly public social media, that my learning curve for all manner of issues shot up at what might as well have been a 45-degree angle. I learnt the word intersectionality, I heard about non-binary genders for the first time, and I also learnt that there were forms of transphobia beyond the casual joking-about-trans-existence transphobia of popular culture. As well as absorbing a huge amount of information, I also built a diverse network of queer friends, many of whom would become integral to my AFK life. It was through this education and community support that I came to my identity as a trans person, to such an extent that the version of my life in which I had not come to Twitter (now X) at this exact time and context is completely unimaginable to me.

That being said, in the intervening years, I have found public social media an increasingly hostile and risky place to post as a trans person, from antagonism and harassment in

[19] later Queer Youth Network, 1999-2016

[20] A "gold star lesbian" being one who has never had sexual contact with a man and is held in higher regard for this.

direct interactions, to a thread I happened across on an anti-trans message board in which users were searching the internet for my personal details[21]. As a result, I utilised privacy settings and removed myself further and further from the fully public space that had provided me with so much until, for my safety, I felt it necessary to delete my X (formally Twitter) account and entire archive.

I maintain private social media profiles on platforms such as Instagram, use walled gardens such as Discord, and have begun to venture into public again with new platforms that promise extensive safety features, such as Bluesky, although with much more caution than before.

How did I come to study the specific topic in the field?

My academic journey has moved across several disciplines in a way that has led my personal interest in trans issues to the current research topic. My background is in psychology and mental health, and since coming into my trans identity in my mid-20s, I have been motivated by the desire to contribute to the improvement of well-being among trans people in whichever field I found myself in, first evidenced by writing my nursing dissertation on the mental health needs of trans people. In my nursing career, I specialised in CAMHS, and my trust funded my MSc in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Given the focus of the MSc, my interest in trans well-being, and the restricted scope possible for a research project conducted whilst still working full-time on a ward, a digital method for examining trans youth mental health emerged as the best fit for my interests and circumstances. Whilst this exact specialisation was in part down to convenience, once I began to focus on digital trans youth experience, I began to reflect on how personally significant the digital had been to me and my peers. I was also struck by the relative lack of research that centred the voices of trans youth on this, or any, topic.

What is my relationship to the topic being investigated? How did I gain access to the field?

[21] They were taking this approach with everyone who had been thanked in the contributors' section of a report about trans youth I had been involved with.

I am a field insider or "native" in that I am a trans person in the UK who uses social media. As such, I am embedded in established networks of queer and trans people both online and AFK, in public spaces and walled-gardens, at professional, political, and social levels.

I am more familiar with some social media platforms than others, which may have influenced the success of recruitment on different platforms.

How does my own position (age, gender, class, ethnicity, economic status,

etc.) influence interaction in the field and the data collection process?

I am a first-generation academic from a working-class background who received a grammar school education, and several of my higher degrees have been funded by scholarships. As such, I have had privileged access to education for someone of my economic background.

Being in my mid-30s, it is possible to argue that my social media environment is a different field from the social media of the age range being studied. However, my work with LGBT+ and trans-specific youth groups provides me with insight into this demographic and means I am comfortable with my approach to them.

Whilst I am trans, I am transmasc and mostly read as male by others. This, combined with my whiteness, is the demographic of trans people most likely to assimilate into academia as researchers, and also the demographic most represented in trans research, particularly amongst youth.

I am an able-bodied person and, as such, do not have lived experience of the intersecting issues that come with being physically disabled in relation to being trans. However, there are a large number of disabled trans people in my personal and professional networks, and I have a particular interest in the relationship between disability and queer studies, as such I have a good grounding in potential accessibility needs participants may have.

I do have experience working closely with diverse groups of trans people who have varied lived experiences, and I will continue to do my best to centre and reflect on such perspectives in my ongoing work.

What is my interpretation perspective?

I acknowledge that it is not possible to uncomplicatedly "give voice" to my participants, as the act of analysis and curation into narrative themes unavoidably alters the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I subscribe to trans existentialism (Haulotte, 2023) from the position of a native who understands that the diversity of trans experience means no one representative can speak for all.

5.4 Method

To answer my research questions, I conducted Asynchronous Online Focus Groups (AOFGs): small, private message board-like groups that take place over several days, in which participants can post responses to researcher questions and each other's answers at a time that suits them (Gordon et al. 2021).

Groups were split by age group: 17-20, 21-24. AOFGs of 4-6 participants were conducted over 3 days, 2 prompts around the topic of the research questions were posted each day by the researcher, and all resulting discussions were moderated by the researcher, with supplementary probes based on emerging themes.

A one-to-one interview was also an option available to participants who could not take part in an AOFG, in which case, the same prompts were used.

5.4.1 Appropriateness of Asynchronous Online Focus Groups

Accessibility is one of the primary advantages of AOFGs, in addition to being covid-safe (Lobe et al. 2020), they also have the benefit of anonymity and accessibility for a geographically diffuse minority population who may, for safety or logistic reasons, be unable to attend a physical group at a set time (Reisner et al. 2018, Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Young people appear to particularly value this convenience without notable loss of face-to-face benefits (Zwaanswijk & Dulmen, 2014).

AOFGs are a logical and established research method when investigating social media use (Skelton et al. 2018), which is itself asynchronous and online. Providing a continuity between the research topic and data collection methods means participants can provide examples of what they are describing and maintain a "contextual naturalness" to their communication, which is important for maximising representative data (Kazmer & Xie, 2008).

When asking marginalised groups about potentially sensitive topics, AOFGs have been found to be particularly useful (Reisner et al. 2018), as the anonymity afforded by the medium elicits more confidence in providing emotionally vulnerable answers. For example, Earnshaw et al. (2020) used AOFGs to ask trans youth (14-22yrs) about bullying and found this an effective method to gather data from this demographic.

As a method that is accessible, covid-safe, elicits high-quality data and is established for studying the topics of social media, sensitive experiences and trans youth, AOFGs were a method well suited to the research questions.

Despite the increased accessibility of AOFGs compared to face-to-face focus groups, it became clear after conducting the first group that it would be necessary to supplement the online groups with offers of 1-1 online data collection in some cases, e.g. participants who were particularly anxious about anonymity due to being "stealth" (i.e. have transitioned but their trans status is not public knowledge), participants with a high public profile it would be difficult to keep anonymous during the group due to the context clues of the topics discussed, or participants who found it difficult to commit to three consecutive days of participation.

As a result, I offered the choice of either a 1-1 email interview or (for participants over 18 years) a Zoom interview to participants for whom an AOFG seemed to be unsuitable. A similar evidence base exists for asynchronous 1-1 interviews as AOFGs (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018) with similar benefits such as accessibility and time to reflect.

AOFGs were chosen as the primary data collection method due to how group communication encourages the exploration and clarification of thoughts in a dynamic which is difficult to replicate one-to-one (Kitzinger, 1995). Whilst the group dynamic is lost in one-to-one interviews, the absence of other participants may result in interviewees feeling more able to say things they fear would face backlash in a group setting, or are self-conscious of expressing for any other reason, which may be an inhibitor even when posting anonymously.

5.4.2 Data Validity

Subjectivity

In my previous research on trans youth (Simms, 2020), I data-scraped public social media posts without directly contacting the posts' authors. This had the advantage of resulting

in naturalistic data but had myriad limitations, one being that the posts lacked further context that communication with their authors could have provided. In a direct inversion of method, for this project, I communicated with participants directly without independently observing their social media use. There are many reasons for this, but my primary motivation was to use a method that allowed trans youth to retain authority on the topic of their own lives, an authority that has historically been denied to them (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Wiggins, 2021; Awkward-Rich, 2022).

Rather than ignore the question of the attitudinal fallacy, that is, the mistake of assuming consistency between attitude and action (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), I acknowledge that self-reported data is subjective and the data I gathered is unlikely to fully align with participants' behaviour. However, it is also a fallacy to conclude that self-reported data about a subject's experience is only valid if it has an objectively measurable corollary. Instead, the validity of different forms of data varies depending on what the data is for (Lamont & Swindler, 2014). As my research questions focused on the affect and experiences of a demographic who are over-researched but under-represented, self-report data is valid and a necessary balance to the overabundance of (often paternalistic) "objective" studies of trans youth.

Fraudulent participation

Whilst anonymity is a significant benefit of online research methods when investigating sensitive subjects, it also leaves them open to fraudulent participation (Miner et al. 2012).

It is an important part of conducting ethical research with trans subjects to compensate them for their labour (Vincent, 2018), so participants were provided with a £20 digital gift voucher once they completed the AOFG. However, this meant that it was an appealing target for people who did not meet the inclusion criteria to attempt to pretend to have that lived experience.

In line with existing recommendations for preventing fraudulent participants from infiltrating online research (Teitcher et al. 2015), a tiered approach was used, assessing for suspicious activity at each stage of recruitment. As a result, potential participants were removed who: sent multiple emails within minutes of each other, claiming to be expressions of interest from separate individuals but with identical message content

(suggesting spambot applications), and those who provided demographic data inconsistent with knowing what being trans is e.g. answering “trans” in every text box including “Sexuality” and “Pronouns”. This resulted in 39 applications being filtered out in total, 30 of these at the first expression of interest stage.

The prevalence of fraudulent applicants highlights the importance of a researcher with lived experience of the minority population being researched, as a cisgender researcher may not have picked up on the subtleties of language that betray a lack of ingroup knowledge. In my experience as a trans person, I am confident that all participants who reached the group or interview stage were genuine, helped by the in-depth, niche nature of the dialog being elicited. Paid online research methods that require less detailed responses e.g. surveys, face a greater threat to their validity from fraudulent participation (Pozzar, et al. 2020).

5.4.3 Research Tool

For this project AOFGs were conducted on Google Groups. Google Groups has a long tradition as a research tool (Ernst, 2001) and is established as an appropriate platform for conducting asynchronous focus groups, particularly in Education (Ibrahim et al, 2021; Döş, 2017; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Vukmirović et al., 2012). Google Groups has also been recommended as a Covid-safe engagement platform (Zayapragassarazan, 2020).

Due to being extremely long-lived for an online platform, having evolved from Deja News Usenet, founded in 1995 and purchased by Google in 2001 (Google, 2001), it does not have the user experience of a modern platform such as Discord or Facebook. A platform more popular with, or at least familiar to, the target demographic may have resulted in more engagement; however, Google Groups was the only free platform with sufficiently extensive and granular settings to facilitate the level of group moderation required for anonymity and safety.

A pilot study was conducted with 4 LGBT+ adults from my personal network (the same prompts were used with “trans” substituted for “LGBT+”) to ensure that the Google Groups settings that were planned to be used functioned as intended and still allowed for discussion between participants. Participants in the pilot study were asked to be vigilant for any issues with the existing set-up, then adjustments were made as a result

of their feedback e.g. adding the requirement that participants using pre-existing Google accounts remove their profile picture for the duration of the group.

Two main themes in the feedback from participants in the trans youth AOFGs were that they would have preferred a more modern, user-friendly platform, but they greatly appreciated the security measures, which made them feel safe.

5.4.4 Inclusion criteria

Below are the inclusion criteria identified in the recruitment material for the project:

- Uk-based
- Aged 14-24
- Identify as trans – here defined as any gender other than the one assigned at birth.
- Experience using any social media, past or present.
- Ability to access and use a Gmail email account and Google Groups.

Participants self-reported whether they met the above criteria, with assessment for fraudulent participation as outlined above.

Due to the form of data collection and resources available to the researcher, there were also some unspoken prerequisites for inclusion, such as being able to read and type in English to a standard high enough to engage meaningfully with the prompts and other participants. Potential participants demonstrated whether they met this criterion by following the detailed instructions for getting involved (choosing a username in the specified format etc).

5.4.5 Recruitment

Traditionally, recruitment of trans research participants has occurred through Gender Identity Clinics (GICs) (Miner et al. 2012). The benefit of this is that GICs are locations where a normally dispersed, small population are concentrated. Outside of this convenience, there are significant drawbacks to recruiting through GICs: becoming a patient of a GIC is a long and arduous process, in the UK waiting lists are currently 5+ years long for a first appointment (Squires et al. 2024) and many trans people do not fit neatly into the binary medical model they work by, making them either inaccessible or

undesirable avenues for a lot of trans people, and therefore a highly biased recruitment site. This is particularly the case for trans children (Gridley et al. 2016), who would not only have to be "out" as trans at an early age, but they would also need to have parents/carers supportive enough of their transition to get them a referral to a child and adolescent GIC long enough before their 18th birthday for the service to deem it worth putting them on the waiting list.

The other issue is one of consent and demand characteristics. Whilst participants would be informed that their involvement in research is optional when seeking their consent, the association with the institution of the GIC may make participants, already mistrustful of being gatekept from care (Richards et al. 2014), feel they may be denied treatment if they do not take part. Such concerns are particularly salient for trans children who, at the time of writing, are required to take part in research if they are to have the chance to access puberty blockers (Doh, 2024).

Recruiting via online networks removes the risk of participants feeling compelled to agree to take part and widens the audience to include trans people who are not currently in contact with a GIC. As seen above, this openness does involve a vulnerability to being exploited by bad actors, but it remains the best route for reaching a more diverse representation of the desired demographic.

16 years+

The project had a Wordpress blog and profiles on Twitter (now X) and Instagram, which shared basic project information and an email address for potential participants to contact for more detailed information. The social media profiles were also used to share feedback from participants who were happy to recommend taking part to others.

Due to the small nature of the target demographic, the project utilised snowballing promotion through trans social media networks. Several people who were eager to take part communicated that they had shared the project information in their university's LGBT+ society Facebook group or Instagram story, and in many initial expressions of interest, people volunteered that they had been sent the project details by a friend.

The project details were also posted on LGBT+ and trans-specific Discord and Reddit channels after securing permission from the admins.

14-15 year olds

Attempts were made to recruit younger participants entirely through LGBT+/trans youth support organisations, by sharing recruitment material through their internal networks. This was to ensure that the youngest potential participants had an existing support network. This could have resulted in a bias towards more socially supported and less isolated participants amongst the youngest group, and this extra cautiousness is perhaps why no participants in this age range were successfully recruited, but the well-being of participants was necessarily the higher priority.

5.4.6 Recruitment Pathway

Recruitment occurred through self-selection; potential participants who established email contact with the researcher were provided with the full participant information sheet, as well as supplementary online security advice developed with the university's data security specialists and were able to ask any questions they had before agreeing to take part.

When recruitment resulted in more participants than planned groups, but not enough to run a new group in that age range, those participants were offered one-to-one interview options.

5.4.7 Group Procedure

On each day of the group, two threads were created, one for each prompt for that day. Participants responded to and discussed the prompts within their dedicated threads. Separate from the prompt threads was the group code of conduct and a list of specialist organisations for signposting should any issues arise; these were always available for the duration of the groups, as well as emailed to participants individually.

	Group Prompts
Day 1	• Which social media platforms do you prefer and/or use the most, and why? Do you use different social media platforms or accounts for different purposes? If so, what influences how and why you do this? • Do you find being trans has an influence on how you use social media, if so how and why? What impact does being trans have on your social media experience compared to (or combined with) other aspects of your identity?
Day 2	• What impact has social media had on your life, good and/or bad? Are there issues you face on social media that you don't face

	offline? And are there things you get from social media that you cannot get offline? • How do you manage your online/offline wellbeing? When things are bad online, do you feel able to disengage? If/when you need support you can only get online, is that online space consistently available to you?
Day 3	• Are there other trans people whose content and posts you particularly notice on social media? What impact does their presence have? Feel free to link and share images of public figures' content, but if you want to discuss non-public figures, please speak in non-specifics without direct links (see code of conduct thread). • If you could wish it into existence, what would the perfect social media experience look like for you as a trans young person? What do you wish other people understood about trans youth using social media?

5.4.8 Tone

Establishing an appropriate tone of communication as the researcher and moderator of the groups was a point of consideration. Due to the absence of audiovisual cues such as vocal tone and body language, I followed advice from existing research on email interviewing (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018) and adopted friendly, semi-casual tone-indicators such as smiley face emojis to punctuate interactions in which I would have smiled in a face-to-face environment.

5.4.9 Flexibility

To encourage engagement, participants were informed that to receive a gift voucher, they had to post a minimum of twice a day: once to a prompt and once to another participant. As groups were conducted, it became clear that this required a case-by-case flexibility so that participants who had issues arise and missed a day were then able to "catch up" and still be compensated for their labour. This involved developing a procedure of sending a check-in email to participants who went 24 hours without posting in the group, informing them that if they made more posts to the equivalent of 2 posts a day overall, they would still receive a voucher. This evolved into leaving the groups functioning for an extra day after their official conclusion to allow for participants to make any final contributions. The development of this boundaried flexibility was found to increase participant engagement, supported by existing literature that taking a flexible, responsive approach aids in the richness of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.4.10 Technical issues

In December 2023, Google announced that it would be discontinuing Usenet Support from Google Groups from Feb 22nd 2024 (Pegoraro, 2023), and some IT professionals have been speculating that Google Groups is being intentionally neglected in its entirety with a view to "kill" the whole service in a similar way to other Google products such as Jamboard. This speculation is based partly on the increasing number of broken components of Google Groups with no sign of repairs (Helwer, 2023).

At the time of researching Google Groups as a data collection tool, these issues were not evident, and the pilot group ran without any technical issues. However, when conducting the final two focus groups, error messages began to appear when attempting to approve posts through moderation, meaning posts had to be manually copied and posted to the group by the researcher with a note indicating the original poster. Investigation of the help forums found only other people experiencing the same issue and no response from Google. Once an explanation was posted to the focus groups outlining the situation, participants continued to take part in this way, submitting posts which were manually copied into the group, with the only apparent disruption being the increased workload for the researcher.

Once the group concluded, participants who met the minimum contribution requirements were emailed a £20 gift voucher. At the same time, they were asked for feedback and were provided with the opportunity for a debrief about how the group went.

Those who provided feedback expressed that they wished the platform used had been more user-friendly but the same participants also expressed approval of how secure their privacy felt using Google Groups with the settings I required[22].

5.4.11 Sample Size

Research funds allowed for up to 50 participants; the initial target aspired to 25, and the final sample size was 17.

[22] Given the rise of AI since the study was conducted, additional privacy settings would be needed to mitigate the risk of data scraping for AI training if such groups were to run now (e.g. Bhuiyan, 2024).

Qualitative research with trans people often has small sample sizes; trans people are estimated to make up less than 1% of the population (Guyan, 2022) and are frequently called upon to take part in research, often without a clear benefit to themselves or the trans community, so this is not surprising (Vincent, 2018; Ashley, 2020b). This then becomes a question of validity, as a common critique of small-sample qualitative research is that it cannot make claims of being representative of wider populations (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). As Crouch & McKenzie (2006) argue, the aim of this type of research is for depth rather than breadth of data, seeking to create "authentic insight" into participants' experiences, rather than broad strokes from large data trends.

Ideally data collection ceases when it reaches the point of saturation, when no novel themes emerge from additional data compared to what has already been collected (Mason, 2010). Saturation is a subjective and problematic concept as all qualitative data will be different, it is the researcher's interpretation as to whether something constitutes a new and significant theme in that data. The other consideration with data collection is the capacity for processing it. The final sample size of 17 produced 24,779 words of data for analysis, and, due to the digital method of collection, contained very little superfluous material (e.g. hesitation sounds or small talk).

5.5 Data analysis

A thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted of the text[23] contributions to the focus groups and one-to-one interview which made up the data set. TA was appropriate for the data for several reasons; it has a broad evidence-base in qualitative research and has the versatility of not being dependent on a specific research approach (Saunders et al. 2019). Through TA, data is coded, patterns in the code are identified and brought together into themes, then themes are analysed and reported.

5.5.1 Compilation

A significant advantage of online text-based discussions and interviews is the objective record of their contents that can be copied into documents ready for analysis without the need for transcription. For initial coding, data was organised by thread (prompt), and

[23] Participants were able to add images to their posts, which would have been included in the thematic analysis (Banks, 2018), but no participants chose to utilise this option.

content was maintained in chronological order, with notes added to clarify who the poster was responding to in each instance. Data was then separated into one file for each participant's responses, maintaining chronological order. Each participant's file was then uploaded to a NVivo database for further coding.

One-to-one messages between the researcher and the participants, posts that were rejected as violating the code of conduct, or any other communication not posted in the AOFGs were not included in the dataset. Anything participants wanted to add to the data at the debrief stage was compiled into one file, as this was not linked to any demographic data, and added to the NVivo database.

5.5.2 Coding

Initial coding was conducted by reading through the compiled group threads in chronological order, to make notes on the emergent patterns from inductive analysis, thus creating a preliminary code book. Once all the data was uploaded to NVivo (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019), these initial codes became the first "nodes". Nodes were added to and expanded via repeated close reading of the files in NVivo. Through the search and cross-referencing affordances of NVivo it was possible to see how often certain terms occurred and which nodes commonly appeared in close proximity to each other.

5.5.3 Themes

Significant emergent themes in early groups informed the nature of the probing supplementary questions in further groups, and themes that emerged in later groups were considered in reviews of the total data. Themes were informed by existing literature, to cluster and label codes, resulting in a hybrid deductive and inductive approach. Due to the relatively small sample size, themes were considered significant if more than one participant spoke on them.

5.6 Ethics

5.6.1 Designing a viable and ethical digital methodology

Despite decades of digital methods being utilised in the humanities, most official bodies and ethics review boards were created for, and still centre around, offline methods (Winter & Gundur, 2024). Whilst many of the core principles are universal, novel digital methods can raise issues from the realities of modern onlife that established ethical and

procedural policies are not equipped for (Trussell et al. 2018). Indeed, similarly to Trussell et al. (2018) who had to work with their ethical body to digitise existing ethical guidelines due to the "unprecedented" method of using a private Facebook group for data collection, extensive work had to be done with the university ethical review committee for this project, including assisting in the development and testing of a new digital security risk assessment (listed in ethics approval, Appendix 1.), as well as sourcing training in safeguarding online communities from the NSPCC, after the review committee were unable to identify what form of safeguarding training would be appropriate for this project. Ethical approval was eventually granted after these additions (Review ID: ER43021142, Appendix 1.)

5.6.2 Consent

The consent procedure was the same for all participants. The ethics committee initially requested that parental consent be sought for participants under 18; this was eventually waived for the following reasons: research with LGBT+ youth differs from most research with youth in general. Parental consent for participants under 18 is usually considered best practice; however, requiring parental consent for LGBT+-specific research is exclusionary of young people who are not "out" to their parents and potentially puts them at risk from anti-LGBT+ parents. This is an example of a practice that is usually a safeguard against vulnerabilities, creating vulnerability when applied to a minority group with different needs (Humphrey et al. 2019).

The need to waive parental consent in research with LGBT+ youth has been stressed by consultations with LGBT+ youth themselves (Humphrey et al. 2019) as well as researchers in the field (Adams et al, 2017; Meezan & Martin, 2009; Pickles, 2020). Similar research to this project, using AOFGs with trans youth to investigate sensitive topics, have waived parental consent without issue (Earnshaw et al. 2020).

In addition to concerns of risk, young people over the age of 13 are generally considered to have capacity to independently engage with (legal) online content. All major social media platforms have a minimum age limit of 13 years old, one year lower than the lowest age of participants, and these platforms have much laxer moderation than the study design, even with the changes made after the introduction of the Children's Privacy Code in 2021 (Hern, 2021). Despite successfully arguing this case to the ethics

committee, after the recruitment process, only one participant was under the age of 18 (17 years old).

Once participants indicated that they understood the project information and wanted to take part, they were provided with links to online consent and demographic forms (hosted on Qualtrics), then asked for their availability, followed by group joining instructions nearer their agreed group start date.

When participants arrived on the group page, they were required to confirm under the introductory information and code of conduct post (see Appendix 2.) that they understood and agreed, before they were permitted to contribute to any discussions. Participants could refer to this post at any time for the duration of the group.

If participants wished to withdraw from the group, they could do so at any time by simply ceasing engagement, however if they wanted to remove any data they had contributed they had until 2 weeks after the group concluded to contact me, after which time the file linking their email address to their data was deleted for confidentiality reasons.

To ensure maximum accessibility of all necessary information, especially for younger and/or neurodivergent participants, audiovisual guides were created using Panopto for the Joining Instructions and Introductory Information & Code of Conduct documents, linking these videos to the top of each document.

5.6.3 Confidentiality

Before being provided with consent and demographic forms, participants were asked to choose a username for themselves that combined a colour and an animal (Gordon et al. 2021), e.g. TealTortoise. This format of username allowed participants to express some personalisation without compromising their anonymity. This username is what they then used for the duration of the group and was the only identifier that other participants saw. Participants were informed that they were not to disclose personally identifiable details about themselves or others; this was enforced through all posts being moderated by the researcher (see Appendix 2.). Potential participants who were still concerned about confidentiality (due to context clues from their experiences, etc) were offered one-to-one interviews.

5.6.4 Moderation and Safeguarding

As a lone researcher, it was only possible to moderate and approve posts at the capacity of an individual. Participants were informed that this was the case and so to expect a slight delay in their posts appearing in the group, especially if they were submitted during the night. Gmail was configured to send the researcher alerts when posts were awaiting moderation so they could be reviewed as close as possible to their submission time without the need for constant monitoring. This allowed for the maintenance of the groups' natural flow of posts whilst not compromising the researcher's well-being.

Participants were required to add content notes to posts which featured potentially distressing subject matter and to colour-redact (make invisible unless highlighted with the cursor) any quotes of abusive speech. Whilst there has been much academic debate about whether such warnings and redactions are useful or necessary, their use gives readers information that allows them to take responsibility for their own well-being and respects their agency to decide what they want to engage with (Godderis & Root, 2016).

Content notes, trigger warnings etc., are a long-established convention of online communication, with archive research placing the first versions of trigger warnings on LiveJournal in 2002 (Colbert, 2017). As a result, all participants seemed familiar with the process and there were no observed issues with their use.

Due to the asynchronous nature of the groups, there was always a list of specialist support organisations and services available in a dedicated pinned post, which was clearly visible and signposted in the code of conduct post. This allowed participants to find support regardless of whether the researcher was actively online. When participants submitted posts which described past distressing experiences e.g. being harassed online, the researcher would reply to their post in the group, expressing sympathy and thanking them for sharing, and would also send them a one-to-one message to check in and provide the details of support organisations relevant to what they had disclosed. Any safeguarding concerns raised by disclosures in the group were discussed with the supervisory team, as described in the participant information sheet.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined this study's ontological positioning in constructivism and how this is an appropriate orientation for examining social media due to the highly social and

personalised nature of online experience in question. Trans theory was then revisited in this context to justify the importance of collaborative mimesis in representing the experiences of trans youth without, in the process of this same logic, reducing gendered experience to one that is entirely socially determined.

Following an ontology of constructivism, it was vital to reflect on the researcher's role in knowledge production, but in a structured way to ensure its relevance; thus, Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti's (2016) framework for biographical reflection was used to situate the researcher in relation to the research.

The method of a series of 3-day AOFGs was explained in detail, including evidence of validity for this method, as well as recruitment and technical challenges. The process of thematic analysis of data was also outlined.

Extensive attention was given to ethical considerations, as is appropriate when working with youth and marginalised groups. However, the lack of existing policy for ethical digital methods made this extra laborious.

6 Results

6.1 Introduction

To contextualise the following analysis, this section begins with some descriptive data about the participants and the social media platforms they reported having used. Analysed results are broken down into the following themed chapters: 1. building identity and community, 2. visibility traps and doors, 3. negative vortextuality 4. transphobia and 5. imagined futures. Between data chapters 4 & 5 is a netnographic reflection on the author's experiences relating the data to their own social media landscape during a period of extreme negative affect; it is placed between data chapters to be representative of the interruption in the project and to allow the final note to be forward-looking.

6.2 Participant demographics

In total, 17 trans young people participated in the study over four AOFGs and one email interview. Their reported age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability status are listed beside their chosen usernames in the table below. Due to trans people being a small minority, there is a risk that too many other demographic details may result in making trans individuals personally identifiable. To avoid this, data on location, employment and education status are described separately.

Username	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Ethnicity	Disability
OrangeStingray	17	male	pansexual	pakistani	No
PinkPig	18	transmasc/ gender punk/its complicated	queer	white	mental health issues, chronic illnesses, autism
BlueDuck	18	nonbinary	bi	white	mobility
FluoresentBeetle	18	trans woman	N/A	N/A	N/A
RedHerring	19	Male	Bi/Queer	White	No
GreenShark	19	Male	Asexual	White	Autism

PurpleTurtle	20	Female (Trans M-F)	Bisexual	White	N/A
BlueLobster	20	Male	Straight/bi-questioning	White	I take medication for chronic anxiety and I am an autistic person.
OrangeZebra	20	Transmasc	Bi	White	Mental health and autism
GreyFox	21	Non-binary (maybe genderqueer)	Pansexual	White	Yes – no details
GreenGriffin	21	non-binary	queer (bi, aroace spec)	white British	No
BlueCrab	21	Transmasc / nonbinary	Queer	White	Mental Health issues, Neurodivergency, Memory and stamina affected (Chronic Fatigue)
GoldenWeevil	22	gendervoid	queer	White	No
IndigoFrog	22	Transmasc	Pansexual	White	Autistic, mental health issues
BlueBee	23	Nonbinary	aroacespec bisexual	White	Mobility issues/chronic pain and fatigue
BlueDog	23	non binary	lesbian	white	No/depression & anxiety
BlackCat	24	Trans masculine non-binary	Gay	White	Neurodivergence/mental health

Of the participants who provided full demographic information, 7 were in full-time education only, 5 were in full-time education and part-time employment, 2 were in part-time employment only, 1 was in full-time employment only, and 1 was in neither education nor employment. All participants reported being based in England: 6 in the North, 7 in the South and 2 in the Midlands. No participants reported living in a rural environment, 5 in suburban and 10 in urban environments.

6.3 Social media platforms

In total, participants named 15 different social media platforms that they used or had used in the past: Instagram (n.16), Twitter (now X) (n.11), Facebook (n.9), Snapchat (n.7), TikTok (n.7), YouTube (n.7), Discord (n.7), Tumblr (n.5), Reddit (n.3), WhatsApp (n.3), Pinterest (n.3), BeReal (n.2), Mastodon (n.1), Bluesky (n.1), LinkedIn (n.1).

It is worth noting that the two platforms that were mentioned by the highest number of participants are the platforms where the most promotion for recruitment took place; however, part of the reason recruitment took place on those platforms was due to their general popularity.

In the data chapters that follow, quotes have been included from participants with the original spelling, grammar and self-censoring (or not) of their posts, as this is part of the data.

7 Data chapter 1: building identity and community

7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the findings that relate to identity development and intracommunity discourse, i.e. it looks inwards at counterintimacies rather than outwards at wider publics, which are addressed in later chapters. Of course, these things cannot truly be neatly separated, so there will be some discussion of interaction between the two. The findings here most closely match existing research about online trans identity work and community discourse.

Almost all themes in the data heavily feature ambivalence due to the impossibility of neatly extracting the positive and discarding the negative, but most participants tend to describe the benefits of social media as outweighing the costs, especially early on in trans identity and community development.

This chapter will first establish the context of how participants describe navigating social media environments before moving on to agentic tools of identity work, through to the labour of transition and managing outness. This is facilitated by emotional support from online trans counterintimacy spaces but hampered by intracommunity conflict.

7.2 “multitool appage”

Most participants described the vital role social media played in realising they were trans and developing their own understanding of their identity (identity work) as well as allowing them to connect with other trans and LGBT+ youth in an online community. It was common for participants to describe many downsides and bad experiences with social media, then go on to stress that it was still a net good in their lives:

> “As much as social media can be a bad place where bad things happen, I can't really say I have a bad perception of it. I think it's been a great place for me to be able to connect with people, meet people chat with people, & when I came out a way that I could be me & show that off without necessarily having to go full public with it. Whilst there are places & pages & people on social media that are horrible (& I'm sure if I wasn't so careful online I'd quickly find more of them), overall I like social media & for me it's been reassuring, even affirming at times” – PurpleTurtle, 20

What PurpleTurtle expresses here aligns with existing research that shows trans youth use social media to build connections (Paceley et al. 2022), do identity work (Cronesberry & Ward, 2024), manage outness (Hiamson, 2018) and receive emotional support (Selkie et al., 2020). To meet this range of purposes, all participants described using various social media platforms in distinct ways:

> "I use a lot of different ones (Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Pinterest, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook....). I tend to use Snapchat, Instagram & YouTube the most out of all of them, but Snapchat is my go-to. I know the app quite well, I know how it works, the features it has & doesn't have & it's just quite convenient overall" - PurpleTurtle, 20
>
> "PurpleTurtle I dig ur multitool appage I can relate" – FluorescentBeetle, 18

Often, they identified one primary or heavy-use platform and other tertiary platforms:

> "I use primarily Facebook, insta and twitter, and the role of each differs significantly from each other. My fb account is a kind of artefact from being a teenager, by which I mean it seems both naff and I also have hangups about it being a serious old people networking platform at the same time. My twitter is anonymous and completely unidentifiable as me. On my twitter I only follow a v cultivated set of accounts that are inspiring and exciting, but I have been finding that it is getting more depressing the more time I spend on there. I also use it to find opportunities such as this one, to apply for funding or take part in research or find out about local events. Instagram functions as my default, where I connect with friends past and present and also future actually." – GoldenWeevil, 22

There were themes in which platforms were seen as most suited to certain kinds of use: Instagram was commonly ascribed the most uses, a place for activism, friends, hobbies and diary keeping. Video-focused platforms like YouTube and TikTok were more likely to be described as pleasurable distractions where content tended to be consumed rather than produced. Facebook was seen as antiquated and only good for staying in touch with older people, like family or employers. Likewise, Twitter (now X) was described as having previously been useful and enjoyable but having deteriorated over time due to increases in hostility. Anonymous platforms like Reddit and Tumblr were relatively safe places to learn about LGBT+ issues and do identity work. Semi-private walled gardens like Discord servers and message boards were for safe trans or LGBT+ spaces.

However, there were also plenty of individual differences between participants, with each building a personalised social media environment, using a range of tactics such as

creating context boundaries by having multiple accounts on the same platform. This is consistent with Jenzen's (2018) findings of trans youth agentically navigating platforms and content.

Participants also frequently spoke of establishing networks that bridge and transcend platforms out of a shared bond or purpose:

> "Tumblr is the one most suited to my current interests and needs (closely followed by discord) because of the content and people. I'm currently very active in certain fandoms and have actually met up with people irl that I originally met on tumblr. It feels like the safest and more interesting platform for me to be on. Discord is also great for chatting with the groups I've met on tumblr, the majority of whom are some form of queer, it's nice to come together from a single interest (like the fandoms we share) and then have an organised place to chat" – BlueBee, 23

Demonstrated here is the formation and maintenance of a queer counterintimacy around a shared interest that is spread across various levels of publicness and anonymity, from Tumblr, which is anonymous and public, to Discord, a semi-anonymous walled-garden, to AFK ('irl"), with personally identifiable one-to-ones. These findings complement existing research on LGBT+ networks communicating across multiple platforms to maximise their utility (Simpson & Semann, 2021). Counterintimacies can transcend any one platform and "multitool" many affordances, e.g. publicness for discovering connections, then increasing privacy for safety. This multitool fluidity could be described as a commoning practice as it works as a form of insurance for the counterintimacy if any one app suddenly changes its features and/or becomes more hostile. This is why it is important to take a holistic view of social media use in addition to granular analysis of individual platforms, as dynamic flows across and between platforms are central to the user experience.

There is a potential paradox here; multitooling across platforms with the same network of people is arguably simpler on a centralised internet where most people have accounts across the same handful of social media platforms, so it is possible for all members to switch seamlessly between them. However, many of the reasons participants feel the need to move between platforms are due to issues partly contributed to by neoliberal platform centralisation, e.g. safety is an issue on large public platforms because the volume of users combined with the engagement-maximising algorithms that enable

networked harassment, which is hard to escape. These issues and their potential solutions will be discussed in later chapters.

For now, I will turn to the themes in what participants explicitly used social media for in the context of trans counterintimacies and the issues that arise in these contexts.

7.3 Identity Work

Many participants described social media as being much more important to them at an earlier stage in their development when they were still trying to work out their gender and/or sexual identity, whereas now they have a good grounding in who they are, they feel better able to take breaks from social media spaces:

> "I probably wouldn't have known I was trans or LGBT in general if I hadn't started engaging with social media, and therefore I would still be living in the sort of disconnected state I had been in for the rest of my life, instead of where I am now and feeling much better in general. I also wouldn't have known I was autistic and wouldn't have gotten the support I needed at university, which has contributed to me improving my grades – Greenshark, 19

Here GreenShark outlines the intersectional importance of social media for any kind of identity work outside the bounds of (neuro)cisheteronormative dominant publics. He also provides an example of the distinction between merely surviving and a liveable life in the Butlerian sense (Butler, 1993), with the "disconnected state" that he frames as a survivable but unfulfilled and unsupported state of abstention.

This narrative of social media providing them with the resources to understand themselves provides a counter-narrative to the argument of social contagion made by trans-hostile actors (Breslow, 2021). Rather than causing confusion by implanting an identity they would otherwise not have heard of, or at least, not until an older age, participants spoke of social media as giving them access to concepts that helped them resolve pre-existing confusion:

> "i think if i didn't use instagram & tumblr as a young teen i wouldn't've realised i was trans as early as i did (13), and wouldn't have such a strong sense of my gender as i do now (20). the queer community on tumblr & 'bandom' instagram was so strong. it genuinely helped me a lot as a young, confused queer kid." – OrangeZebra, 20

This data contributes to existing evidence for the Importance of social media to trans youth for agentic learning outside of the cultural cisgenderism of the dominant affective public (Kennedy, 2018, 2021).

7.3.1 Secondary interest

As already touched on as an example in the multitool approach to social media, a secondary interest, in addition to trans status, can be a formative binding agent for a counterintimacy. Many participants spoke of this importance of an overlapping interest, such as books and music, as an on-ramp to doing trans/queer identity work and setting up a comfort space:

> "I run a queer bookstagram and that makes me feel a lot more 'at home' than anything I have offline in terms of social spaces. I enjoy very selective hobbies (such as reading, making art) and I find it difficult to get myself involved offline, so being online does really help me." – IndigoFrog, 22

This aligns with existing research regarding online fandom communities and identity development for sexual and gender minority youth in the US & Canada (McInroy & Craig, 2020), which found fandoms frequently thought of as "safe havens" for experimentation and validation. The centrality of a secondary topic to a community that makes trans identity optional for membership, whilst also making such identities explicitly welcome, presents an ideal environment for identity work without having to fully commit to begin taking part. That is, a young person who *knows* for certain that they are a fan of a certain author, tv show etc. and thinks they *might be* trans can explore this within trans-friendly fandom counterintimacies without having to leave again if they conclude they are not trans, because transness is not the binding factor of that public. However, the significant queer presence in online fandoms does not come without reactionary pushback:

> "Unfortunately in fandom social medias there are people that think we (as queer people) are 'taking over' and trying to force characters to be trans or gay due to headcanons or even just fun posts exploring how it would change things." - BlueBee, 23

Over a decade since the GamerGate phenomenon that began in 2014, much has been written about the highly motivated and hostile corners of fandoms that rail against any perceived move towards diversity in their preferred media. This has become a cornerstone of the ongoing culture war against "wokeness" (MacDonald, 2024).

This has implications for trans youth looking to fandoms as “safe havens”, as BlueBee makes clear, trans-inclusive fandom spaces online may be common, but cannot be assumed, especially if they are public or lack moderation.

7.3.2 Lurking

One way to assess the suitability of an online space or community is to spend some time observing it without interacting. Several participants stressed the importance of being able to “lurk” online without posting, whilst they learnt enough to feel confident to start posting themselves and interacting with others:

> “It definitely started off being just reading other people's posts and getting knowledge from that, but as I became more comfortable in myself I started engaging in conversations. Both have been super helpful in learning & accepting my identity, as well as finding the confidence to tell others as for a long time I was too worried that no one would "get it".” -BlueDog, 23

Whilst lurking may seem passive and self-isolating from its definition alone, participants’ description of its role in learning and comfort matches those provided by trans writers such as Plett (2023, p.147):

> “sometimes, there are lovelinesses buried in this action. There’s that one good trans message board I lurked on for years, barely ever commenting, and I learned and grew a lot through that lurking; it helped me dive into the adult trans life I had to live.”

Trans lurking (as a precursor to trans living) can then be formulated as a reconnaissance stage of identity work in which trans youth build their agentic curricular (Kenedy, 2021; Jenzen, 2017) at the same time as building confidence about what will eventually be safe to disclose and where:

> “Like BlueDog it started reading other peoples posts and stories and seeing myself in them, i then started seeking out posts and people to talk to about it, or a space (like a subreddit) that I could talk about my experience of identity.” -BlueBee, 23.

This is unlikely to be unique to trans identity work, Are et al. (2024) found that LGBTQIA+ adults commonly described lurking as an early stage in a continuum of digital identity expression. This has implications for the importance of trans visibility for the purpose of education and identity work, as trans people who have less public presence are also less available to gender-questioning people looking to learn from them via lurking on their content.

Whilst lurking can be a stage in identity work, participants also described lurking on platforms where they were comfortable only consuming content and had no desire to make posts themselves:

> "For mindless scrolling I usually use Reddit or Tumblr, although I seem to be in a bit of a love/hate relationship with them! I don't like to post on there cos it seems to be a constant comedy contest and I'm happy being a forever lurker." – GreyFox, 21.

Here is an ambivalence represented by being happy with a love/hate relationship with platforms that are partly pleasurable. The implication is that lurking is a low-stress form of social media engagement with people or topics of interest that can be conducted without the pressures or anxieties associated with being perceived by others.

7.4 Transition and managing outness

Once trans people confirm their trans identity to themselves, they then have to continuously decide to what extent they want their trans status to be known by others. In line with existing research discussed in the literature review (Buss et al. 2022; Hanckel et al. 2019; McConnell et al. 2018) most participants described putting a lot of thought and labour into managing their "outness" across different platforms and contexts to avoid context collapse, specifically being outed to unwanted audiences:

> "On a good amount of platforms, I have two accounts (I'm not fully out yet) so that different people can see different things. For example, I have my Instagram account I've had since I got the app, but I've also got a second one which is my sort of 'future Instagram' where I'm fully out, & slowly move people from one account to the other as & when I feel ready to. Other forms of social media where I only have one account, I'll either block people I don't want finding it until I'm ready or I haven't transitioned it to true me yet. It's either because there's people I don't want to know or people I don't want to know YET" -PurpleTurtle, 20

Haimson (2018) refers to this maintenance of multiple simultaneous online identities across different accounts during such an intensely liminal period as utilising "social transition machinery". In examining social transition online, Haimson (2018) compares van Gennep's (1909) liminality framework for rites of passage: separation, transition and incorporation, to data from trans bloggers. Van Gennep proposed that people had to remove themselves from their existing networks to break with their previous identity, followed by a neutral identity-less transition period, concluded with reincorporation back into the social world with their new identity. Until recently, under the medical

model of transness, this model of transition was the expectation, with trans people being told by clinicians they would have to leave their families, friends, and job, move to a new place and start completely fresh where no one was aware of their trans status[24] if they were truly committed to transitioning (Dame-Griff, 2023).

Haimson (2018), in contrast to van Gennep's framework and pre-internet transition guidelines for trans people, found that "people stay online throughout and beyond life transitions". This is to be expected, as outlined in the history of the trans internet section; the spread of internet use coincided with, and in many ways facilitated, trans people forming a sociopolitical umbrella identity, with trans becoming a possible subject position rather than (only) being considered a medical condition. This does not mean that trans people are all now happy to be identified as such, or to be known as trans in all contexts, but it allows for many more opportunities for continuity and community.

As we can see from PurpleTurtle, during transition, trans youth online have to not only negotiate the disclosure of their gender repeatedly and over multiple contexts, as there is never just one "coming out" event, but they also have to decide and manage the avoidance of context collapse on platforms where they never want their trans status to be known, how to keep separate those who shouldn't know yet and those who shouldn't know at all.

When participants brought up this boundary management, they were asked how much consideration they gave this labour in their day-to-day use of social media:

> "I'm definitely a lot more careful about it. When I first made my second Instagram, the first thing I did was look through who was on my old account & block everyone I didn't want to find it. I'm a lot more careful with what I share, especially on photo apps like Snapchat or BeReal, always making sure that I either post to the right story (I have a private Snapchat story for trans-me) or on BeReal, I make sure my nails or outfits or flags aren't in it. I was quite a careful & thorough user anyway, but I'm definitely more so now…
>
> It is kind of second nature to me, I was always like it a bit anyway but more so now. But it's kinda a knee-jerk response now, like I'll take a pic & take an extra second to check it to be sure of where I want it to go. Doesn't feel like a big deal" – PurpleTurtle, 20

[24] Known as living "stealth".

Here, what could be described as paranoid posting (Johnson, 2022) has become habitual. James (1890) formulated habit as a faculty that is developed through learning, then subsumed below the level of awareness to diminish the level of fatigue it causes. PurpleTurtle has internalised the need to rigidly guard her context boundaries to the point of making this labour invisible.

7.4.1 Stealth

The anonymous online nature of data collection made it possible to recruit several participants who are (or intend to live) "stealth", meaning trans people who have transitioned and keep their trans status private in their day-to-day lives. This produced a range of challenges to engaging with mainstream social media culture both online and AFK:

> "nearly every event I go to has to have some sort of photo or video to post on social media. This has been particularly annoying with societies at university- especially for LGBT+ specific events. Usually they ask, but then I feel awkward having to step out of the way. I hate seeing pictures of myself, and videos are much worse because of dysphoria. From my perspective at least, there is usually no reason to post pictures like that online, especially since I want to eventually go stealth and don't want pictures of me now online." -GreenShark, 19

As addressed above, since the formation of the trans umbrella, aided by the internet, now publicly identifying as trans is not uncommon. However, plenty of trans people still choose to live stealth in at least some, if not all, contexts in their lives for various reasons. Whilst, arguably due to cissexism, many cisgender people would still assume trans people would want to live stealth if they can, it is not the default assumption within explicitly LGBT+/trans-specific events, where some level of comfort with being identified as trans is implied by their presence in that space.

This would be less of an issue if there were a divide between online and AFK life, but as GreenShark describes, images and videos of AFK events becoming social media content is the norm. The default publicness of social media in general was addressed in the literature review as being a risk to trans people, particularly those who are multiply marginalised or vulnerable (Cho, 2018; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2021), and here GreenShark demonstrates how this online intracommunity inequality interacts with AFK environments, in which those least concerned with privacy can unintentionally alienate and exclude others both affectively by othering them and physically through their

"having to step out of the way". This creates a dilemma for LGBT+ event organisers who want to promote their events as safe, enjoyable and inclusive, as photos can act as reassuring evidence of what these events look like, but can have the opposite effect on potential attendees concerned about their privacy if these images are widely used.

7.4.2 Data longevity

Many other participants, without expressing a desire to go stealth, still expressed a high level of anxiety about the longevity of their historical data and how it may be used against them in the future:

> "Over time I've become massively aware of how every tiny detail could affect my future as a trans person"..."I'm still working on removing my internet presence from when I was much younger because no one told me what impact that might have on me when I grew up and could be used to work out more identifying things about me." – PinkPig, 18.

Research has found retroactive privacy concerns such as this are higher among people who feel surveilled (Zhang et al., 2023). Given the data on harassment and hostility in the following chapters, feeling surveilled is to be expected, as hostile actors can search public internet archives. Such retroactive privacy concerns could also be formulated as paranoid posting, escaping from temporal containment in the present to historic content over which the poster often has less control.

This retroactive privacy concern was not limited to what is already public, but also the long-term security of data that is currently private but out of their hands:

> "I did look back at some of my old whatsapp chats and it was really strange, like I was right back in high school (in a bad way). Kinda disconcerting that those chats are on a server somewhere forever" -GreyFox, 21

Whilst the maintenance of multiple accounts can enable parallel continuous contexts throughout and beyond social transition. The ability to delete pre-transition content is an important option to have:

> "I have on many occasions deleted and remade accounts for all three (twitter insta and snap), for the sake of cutting ties to my deadname or anything to do with me before I came out." -OrangeStingray, 17

It is common for trans people, even those who are comfortable disclosing their trans status, to want to remove references to their name given at birth or "deadname" wherever possible (Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2023; Steadman, 2021). Pre-transition

images are often also removed from public view and are presumably included under "anything to do with me before I came out". In interviewing US trans adults Lerner et al. (2020) found this privacy concern regarding pre-transition data is often borne of a sense of creepiness from cis people showing a fascination with accessing this information in a disrespectful and invalidating way.

This links with a commonly expressed wish for what participants wished people understood about how trans youth use social media, that trans youth need to be given the grace to experiment:

> "Trans youth on social media also - in my experience - start exploring their identity before coming out in real life. They may start using different pronouns or a different name, it's a safe place to explore who they are without the burden of parents and friends that expect something different. It's important to give them this space, and to be understanding of how they may change their pronouns etc a few tomes during this exploration as it is a process. I myself practiced going by a different name in a discord server with no irls because it gave me a place to attempt this that i could then say 'no that didn't work for me' with no backlash or judgment." -BlueBee, 23

Prior to the internet such identity work was harder to do in a managed way, but with the opportunity to do so online comes the long memory of the internet, making it more difficult to exercise the right to be forgotten. Even if data is removed from original host platforms, technological affordances such as screenshots mean there is no way to know who has copies of defunct or private content, or stop their copy and spread, which makes them a common technology of harassment (Corry, 2021).

7.5 Emotional support

Emotional support from trans and queer counterintimacies on social media were described as important for participants regardless of their identity status. However, it was emphasised that this support was particularly valuable at earlier stages of transition. Whilst this doesn't necessarily need to be public support, seeing that community support is available can serve to increase the confidence of nervous young people:

> "I think that social media has definitely allowed me to have more involvement with the trans (and queer in general) community. Mostly this is a good thing, especially when I was coming to terms with my identity and needed to see people online being themselves and the overwhelming support the community gave them." -GreenGriffin, 21

Given the ubiquity of hostility and risks of context collapse on public platforms (examined in Data Chapters 3&4), many participants curated safe spaces online where they could be vulnerable and do identity work:

> **"**On discord many of the servers I'm in are actually queer focused or just full of queer people, so it's a safe place to share my experience and have it seen and acknowledged. Being in these spaces actually helped me realize my identity and accept it, I'm not sure how far along my journey I'd be without that experience. It's a place where I can now fully be myself and around people like me" -BlueBee, 23

Most participants described social media as a place they go for emotional support, if not in trans or LGBT+ walled gardens such as Discord servers, then in queer-friendly communities that also act as distractions from the negativity of being trans online, as shown earlier in the secondary interest section. This was particularly important to participants who were multiply marginalised e.g. trans and disabled:

> "I've also found a queer circle online through social media as many of us have health issues that prevent us from visiting irl despite living in the same city, where health has limited me, social media has freed me." -BlueBee, 23

Much like identity work, participants tended to describe social media as an important source of emotional support when they were younger, before (with the help of social media) they developed more intentional networks of support:

> "Online support from friends used to be my lifeline through high school but nowadays idk it doesn't have the same appeal I guess." FluorescentBeetle, 18

> "I'm fortunate now that I can also get support from people who aren't just online, or if they are they're in a separate online space (like discord). However, past reliance on online spaces has made me value them alot more and as such I moderate a few lgbtqia online spaces" -GreenGriffin, 21

Here GreenGriffin outlines how their experience of receiving care from an online counterintimacy has led to a commitment to contribute to these spaces as a queer commoning practice that maintains them for others.

Contributing to emotional support does not have to be as labour-intensive as becoming a moderator or even writing personal content; simply sending existing content directly to others in their network strengthened attachments during difficult periods:

> "Me and a couple of friends share depressing memes when we're feeling a bit rubbish as sometimes they're easier to share than actually saying how you're feeling." -BlueDog, 23

This concurs with findings such as Rothbaum et al. (2022) that the parasociality of consuming and sharing other's trans content can contribute to trans people feeling supported.

Whilst most participants described not needing to seek emotional support online as often as when they were younger, some still relied on the availability of trans counterintimacies as crisis support:

> "I only really seek online support when I'm desperate, but even then I only really reach out to other members of the trans community e.g. discord servers or instagram groups (in the past). The space is consistently available but sometimes there are no responses or people may ignore the messages." -OrangeStingray, 17

OrangeStingray hits on a drawback to seeking support on social media: in addressing a network rather than an individual, the responsibility to respond is diffused. If no one specific is addressed, each member of the audience may assume someone else will answer, or that an answer is not required at all. In Malatino's (2022) model of a trans affective commons, care is delivered through empathetic witnessing and amplifying of negative affect; without evidence of that witnessing, the audience remains imagined and thus has the potential to be paranoidly read as uncaring. Noting this negativity as a trend, one participant expressed concern that venting as a communication style has become a norm amongst trans youth online which may contribute to their sense of alienation both online and AFK:

> **"**I wish that trans youth could see that LGBT spaces are great, but when combined with other spaces for example, mental health support groups, interest groups for their passions, etc. Getting trapped in the very cyclical venting that the LGBT/trans spaces on social media will isolate you from the rest of your in-person life. I wish other people could understand why they are doing this though- a lot of my experience in highschool, people were not very friendly with the trans youth because we were going through a social media age where venting at people was the way to do things- I wish that other people could understand why these youth are angry and that they need other resources brought to them to make a difference." -BlueLobster, 20

My previous research into how trans youth tweet about mental health (Simms, 2020) found this tendency to venting, which garnered supportive responses in times of crisis but mostly went unanswered, an apparent understanding that their posts were a form of public diary. BlueLobster was not the only participant to wish that people would try

to understand trans youths' anger before being alienated by it, which will be explored in the section on instant embattlement in Data Chapter 4.

7.6 Intracommunity conflict

Whilst the data covered thus far shows the importance of learning from and being supported by other trans people online, several participants spoke of intracommunity conflict online, primarily around who "counts" as trans, being particularly harmful to their own identity work:

> "I find with like the internal trans issues online have been entirely unhelpful to all parties. I don't really understand being transmed anyways but how people feel so comfortable knowingly harming their own community. You're bang on with the "right way to be trans" it still urks the back of my brain where I'm convinced that I'm somehow losing my beauty being on hrt(?) Its weird. In my opinion the only "right way to be trans" is to literally just be trans." – BlueCrab, 21

We saw in the literature review that such conflicts around what it means to be trans have existed at least as long as online trans groups, and generally fall into the camps set out by Sutherland (2021), the modern iteration summed up by participants as "transmed" versus "tucute", mapping onto Sutherland's "medically-based" and "unbounded" trans membership models respectively. The reviewed literature pointed to the importance of such intracommunity conflict for the development of trans discourse on the macro scale, but findings here show the harm that such conflict can do on the level of the individual when at a vulnerable stage of identity work:

> "yeah I get you with the whole 'right way to be trans' thing, I think. when I first came out the whole transmed/tucute thing was going around and I came out as non-binary. the transmeds were really angry about it and it sent me straight back into the closet for like three years - and that was on an LGBT+ account that I was used to getting hate on. I think it's definitely worse when the people you think are meant to be your community just don't support you." GreenGriffin, 21

It is worth noting that all the participants who mentioned being negatively affected by this discourse had genders other than male or female, suggesting it was more salient to people who saw the validity of their transness being argued over. Whilst the distinction between non-binary people and trans men and women has been critiqued and contested as creating another false binary (Amin, 2022), that there are trans people who experience their gender as binary, or at least conceive of their transness as categorically

different to that of non-binary people is evidenced by the experiences collected here and in existing literature (Jacobsen et al. 2022; Konnelly, 2023; Amm, 2022). This only becomes a conflict where there is an asymmetrical perception of community membership between subscribers to medically-based and unbounded transness, in which subscribers to transmed arguments frame the conflict as policing the barrier of transness from would-be intruders, but subscribers to tucute arguments frame the conflict as intracommunity rejection. As intimate publics and counterintimacies are bonded by recognition, the refusal to be recognised is a denial of access. This intracommunity vantage point may make it more affectively impactful. In examining the work of Pachankis et al. (2020) on intracommunity stress and applying it to trans communities Plett (2023, p.121) summarises this: "Being pushed away from your own people hurts more because you need them more". Put another way, in this quote from BlueDog that will be examined further in Data Chapter 4:

> "I feel absolute despair when seeing anti-trans things, especially when it comes from transmeds who should understand". -BlueDog, 23

Such findings suggest an expectation of t4t care that mirrors the sense of obligation to other trans people expressed by many participants, and distress is caused when there is a falling short by people who "should understand". This can read as almost a wishing for what trans counterintimacies are frequently accused of being by anti-trans commentators: a cohesive unit of understanding e.g. "the cult of gender ideology" (Strimpel, 2025), not out of a lack of tolerance for a variety of views but more out of heartache at the "crabs in a barrel" (Malatino, 2022, p.49; Peters, 2016) quality of conflict within a community where structural sources of harm are out of reach and so blows are thrown internally, where they can land (Marvin, 2022)[25].

Berlant (2022) conceptualised the inherent inconvenience that must be reckoned with in group relations:

> "Just because we are in the same room does not mean that we belong to the room or to each other. The quality of the affinity is built from the action of relation and the conventions that convince you to summarize sociality as a done

[25] However, even if transmeds conceive of tucutes as an unrelated group, this does not necessarily foreclose on intergroup solidarity between marginalised identities, which makes it all the more hurtful when even that is denied.

> deal. Nor is the overdetermination of feeling that we call ambivalence only a relation between antithetical tones; to the contrary, the tones belong together like vocal cords in disharmony with themselves." (Berlant, 2022, p10)

To be able to come to terms with trans counterintimacies as a disharmony of ambivalence, one must develop a sense of the variety and scale of "tones" contained within.

Amin (2022) argues that so few trans people truly identify as "binary" as not to warrant a binary/non-binary trans divide, never mind those dogmatic about the universality of the gender binary. Regardless of the veracity of this claim, existing research and data in this study evidence how a variety of features of social media can warp and distort perceptions of predominance so that it becomes hard to judge what proportion of people subscribe to a particular belief (e.g. Van Houtven et al. 2024). A viewpoint might be prominent online because those who espouse it are particularly active and proselytizing posters, without it necessarily being commonly held, or it might just be commonly held in certain digital spaces where like-minded people have gathered, or it may be commonly expressed publicly without being believed by many who post it[26]. The result is that for anyone trying to do the identity work to establish themselves as a trans subject online from a starting position outside an established trans network, either online or AFK, they have no frame of reference for how much weight to give an invalidating comment from another trans person. If they are in a paranoid position they may be inclined to believe it is a representative opinion and they are not welcome.

The next chapter will explore data on the theme of possibility modelling more deeply, but on the topic of validity and intracommunity conflict, it was clear that finding and connecting with trans people whose experience and/or formulation of transness resonated with theirs was an important factor in moving on from a paranoid position that views invalidating their transness may be universal:

> "Using social media and connecting with other trans people also helped me to accept my identity as a non-binary person who currently presents quite fem, I'm not sure what I'll end up looking like but connecting with other non binary people like me helped me to learn that I don't need to look a certain way to be valid in

[26] Rather, it is deployed as a political tactic to promote assimilability into wider society, as in the respectability politics of transnormativity (Jacobsen, et al. 2022), explored further in the next chapter.

> being non binary. I don't think this is something available to learn anywhere other than from trans+ people." -BlueDog, 23

Much like the knowledge that "trans lives are lived, thus liveable" (Awkward-Rich, 2022), "trans lives are varied; thus, sometimes, disharmonious", to paraphrase Berlant and apply them to trans group relations specifically, is a depressed position hard-won by experience. Participants such as GreenGriffin were delayed from reaching this position by not initially finding "their people" in the emotionally vulnerable act of coming out, and so they retreated until they built more knowledge and connections.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the importance of social media for various aspects of early transition. By first establishing the context of participants' fluid social media environments characterised as "multitool appage", this chapter then examined the ways in which social media is vital for trans identity work. Agentic identity curriculum building involved non-committal strategies such as lurking in queer spaces or using a secondary interest, e.g. fandom, as an on-ramp.

Once participants had established trans identities within themselves, they described how social media is then used as a technology of transition, and its affordances are used for managing outness, at the same time as posing a constant threat of context collapse and unwanted disclosure. Managing this risk sometimes became a matter of habit, but as participants' concerns change over time, anxieties can emerge about the longevity of historic data.

The access social media provides to emotional support from other trans and queer people was not unique to early transition but tended to be more valued at this period of development. Participants described this support as tending to be hosted on walled garden social media, such as Discord servers, which allow for the creation of entirely queer or trans spaces, in which trans youth can be themselves around people like them.

Despite outlining the importance of education and support from an online trans counterintimacy to their identity work and transitions, some participants also stressed that intracommunity conflict had impeded this development. Non-binary youth who encountered trans people online who acted as hostile gatekeepers of transness

expressed feeling delayed in further identity work until they found other people with the same expansive experience of transness as them.

Through the above data, a narrative of fragile ambivalence emerges. Social media is both vital as a technology of transition due to the opportunities for learning and connection not available AFK, but it also presents risks of being invalidated, dismissed or exposed at a particularly vulnerable time in identity development.

8 Data Chapter 2: Visibility Traps and Doors

8.1 Introduction

The previous data chapter examined many facets of social media that participants found useful for identity work; one aspect of this that has yet to be covered is finding possibility models in the visibility of other trans people. As the visibility of other trans people on social media, whether participants were lurkers or active posters on public platforms themselves, was the most common theme in the data, it warrants a dedicated chapter. Trans visibility was experienced by participants in multiple ways, including mundane through to aspirational possibility modelling, but was also felt to have contrasting limiting effects, such as normative trends in representation. This chapter will explore the affective responses to the traps and doors of trans visibility on social media as described by the participants.

8.2 Day-to-day trans existence

Many participants explained that rather than famous or highly accomplished trans people, the trans visibility online that meant the most to them was seeing a large volume of other trans people living their normal day-to-day lives:

> "I see trans people all the time, but I don't particularly note specific people. But a collective impact they all have together is something that I really appreciate and I think that with so many people being able to be more open about their identities online, it has helped a lot of others begin to see some of the issues that we are facing and be able to learn how to help us." – BlackCat, 24

So, aside from the importance of trans visibility to identity work for trans people, the openness of trans counterintimacies to wider affective publics was seen as having the political purpose of parasocial stigma-reduction and education of cis people:

> "I agree distraction is the best technique, and I often turn to YouTube for this so I can see trans people just existing and countering the rhetoric that we are somehow terrible people" -GreenGriffin, 21

As discussed in the literature review, there is some evidence for this belief in the educational and political potential of day-to-day trans visibility (Rothbaum et al., 2022). At the same time, the affective impact of witnessing trans people online en masse was also significant beyond its educational value for cis people or early transition trans people:

> “their presence is so amazing honestly, especially since there's such a wide variety. it's like, wow! trans people not only exist, but can THRIVE and be happy and successful, and it just makes me so happy for my community. i say this a lot but i really do love trans people. so much. we r amazing” -OrangeZebra, 20

Here, OrangeZebra expresses pride and affection in sharing membership of a trans counterintimacy with thriving, successful people. However, the trans people participants witnessed online didn’t have to be doing exceptionally well to have a positive affective impact; visible trans mundanity was seen as a win against hostility to trans existence:

> “I also love seeing trans friends / trans people who aren't completely in the public eye just existing and being happy as trans people. A lot of mainstream media focuses on anti-trans issues so it's great to see trans people just being themselves and getting on with their lives.” -BlueDog, 23

Existing research shows a high likelihood of expressed hostility online towards trans visibility in any form (e.g. Bradley, 2020), and this is also seen elsewhere in the data. Thus, public representation of trans mundanity comes with a level of risk to the poster that is far from conducive to “getting on with their lives”. More often, online spaces where participants felt safe to share the banalities of day-to-day life with other trans people most often varied from semi-private to very private, such as Discord servers and friends-only locked accounts on platforms like Instagram. This lack of public mundanity has implications for the possibility models that trans youth have for being trans in public life, without having to be an exceptional trans public figure.

GreenGriffin described feeling a responsibility to contribute to addressing this lack of ordinary public representation of trans lives, beyond what would normally be their comfort level in the current hostile climate:

> “my private social media definetely have a higher rate of trans content just because i love documenting everything and i feel i need to 'tone it down' on some of my other accounts to be accepted. however, with the UK's current political climate i am trying to be more blatantly trans/queer where possible to try and normalise it and make younger trans people feel safer.” -GreenGriffin, 21

As detailed previously, trans people have been found to conduct “privacy calculus” (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018) when trying to raise funds for gender affirming care. It is arguable that what GreenGriffin describes here is also a form of privacy calculus, one that weighs the potential benefit to younger trans people as greater than the risk to themselves of not being accepted.

This faith in visibility as a door to liveable trans lives is the first of several points of comparison with Sedgewick's (1997) critique of a hermeneutics of suspicion throughout the analysis of the data. It follows a similar logic, that through the relentless pursuit of exposure, dissemination will reach a critical mass that will inevitably result in positive change, be it via "normalisation" or "awareness raising". Where it differs from faith in awareness raising is that many participants did report experiencing a positive impact from seeing other trans people being visible, whereas, as will be shown in the next chapter, awareness raising around trans news appeared to be primarily anxiety-provoking. From this distinction, it can be argued that, rather than intending to contribute to widespread societal change from their visibility, GreenGriffin is attempting a trans commoning practice to reach yet unknown, imagined trans youth. The target is a trans counterintimacy, even if it means exposure to a wider public and the risks that entails.

8.3 Public Figures

When prompted about whether there were trans people whose posts they particularly noticed on social media (Prompt 5), many participants listed public figures they admired or found comforting. The most cited celebrities were actor Elliot Page and social media influencer Dylan Mulvaney:

> "I also enjoy seeing trans celebrities/influencers such as Elliot Page and Dylan Mulvaney. Seeing Page is especially awesome due to knowing of them pre-transition. It just provides so much trans joy for myself in a space that pushes a lot of negativity!" – IndigoFrog, 22

Both Page and Mulvaney have transitioned in the public eye, and whilst both were over the age range of study when they began to transition, participants found recognition in their shared experiences:

> "Dylan Mulvaney! Idk if this is going to be an obvious one but when I started to come out to my closest friends they'd already heard about Dylan & sent me her account & it's just so fun I love it!!! I think having Dylan on TikTok is a bit reassuring, its nice to be able to see someone taking charge of their identity so publicly, when she used to share 'Days of Girlhood' it was so nice to be able to keep up & see what was happening with them! Just positivity! It's a real shame that she's receiving such a bad media light at the moment in the states following their collaborations with Nike & Bud Light & she's definitely taking / taken steps back from social media, I really hope she comes back but would totally see why she wouldn't :((" -PurpleTurtle, 20

Here we see one of the many ambivalences of trans visibility that has led to its formulation as both a “trap” and a “door” (Gossett et al. 2018). Whilst participants get “trans joy” from high-profile transitions as a feature of online trans counterintimacies, and the benefits of loved ones having parasocial exposure to celebrity trans people that eases their coming out, they also see these figures they relate to becoming fodder for wider affective public storms around trans people, as a battleground in the culture war.

The trans celebrities mentioned most frequently by participants have resources at their disposal to minimise the cost of their publicity to themselves. Elliot Page frequently makes statements outlining his privilege in this respect; for example, regarding being the victim of a transphobic attack on the street, Page stressed his ability to buy a much higher level of security compared to most trans people, “Doesn’t mean it’s not traumatic…But I have resources that, in every instance that is difficult, protect and can shield me from these things” (Kaufman, 2023).

Whilst Elliot Page and Dylan Mulvaney were frequently mentioned as public figures participants loved to see doing well, the public figures participants most often reported finding helpful were trans YouTubers with large platforms who made content that countered popular anti-trans arguments:

> "I think one of the biggest impacts they have is when they talk about social injustice and politics - it's so comforting to see people with a actual platform advocating for trans people, speaking out against TERFs and transphobes and being so well-spoken. Whenever I'm feeling really stressed about the political climate in the UK in relation to trans rights, watching these peoples' content makes me feel so much more secure and hopeful” OrangeStingray, 17

Not only does seeing this content provide an emotional comfort, but it was also described as reducing the burden of labour on the individual to become experts in arguing for their own existence:

> “now if I want to see trans content I tend to go to NoahFinnce or JammiDodger just because they often post reactions to events happening or transphobes and it's nice to see the counter-rhetoric to transphobia without having to articulate it yourself”- GreenGriffin, 21

Whilst seeking out content that articulates what one already believes may be argued to be the very definition of an echo chamber, it is arguable that finding trusted trans figures and following their content relieves trans youth like GreenGriffin of the labour of having to develop defences and justifications for their existence from first principles, which is

no small burden for a demographic so besieged by hostility. This fits with existing research (Selkie et al., 2020) that trans youth value access to these level-headed arguments from YouTubers when they find transphobic comments too affectively overwhelming to formulate articulate responses themselves. This is a clear example of the role of agentic learning on social media beyond identity work, building a personalised curriculum of trans-affirming arguments, which, if an echo chamber were capable of truly being achieved, would not be necessary to learn.

Indeed, as well as their exposure to intracommunity conflict as covered in the previous chapter, and the vortex of negative trans content that will be explored in the next chapter, trans youth are exposed to a variety of trans influencer content and display critical discernment between them:

> "In terms of a public figure I've mostly got 2 actual ones, one being Jamie Raines who I would essentially study before I was out as trans, an egg if you will. His content was doing really well around a similar time to Kalvin Garrah (WHO IS A TERRIBLE INFLUENCE AND HAS DONE SO MUCH HARM). The contrast between the both despite (to my knowledge) both being binary trans men i felt so much safer absorbing Jamie's content and it greatly helped me understand the practicality of transness even if it wasn't my specific identity." – BlueCrab, 21

Finding a place of safety from which to study is an understandable motivation, and as BlueCrab points out, homogenous identification is not necessary for this sense of safety to be present.

However, engaging with this content that focuses on negative news or transphobia can still be draining and, as with many other themes, a feeling of obligation is present in the data. In this case, it is an obligation to keep up with these trans content creators, even as they represent an unrealistic standard to live up to:

> "names like PhilosophyTube and Contrapoints come to mind for me ig, I think generally I enjoy their content but sometimes they do just kinda seem like ethereal beings that you can never really come close to aha. I should follow more trans creators but idk I feel like it can just bring me down when they're politically focused" -FluorescentBeetle, 18

The impact of the out-of-reach standards participants took from high-profile trans content creators will be examined later in the chapter. Here, the focus is kept on the sense of duty to consume trans-made content. FluorescentBeetle expresses guilt about not putting trans counterintimacies before her own well-being. This was a recurring

theme across many issues; participants' conceptions of trans counterintimacies included members more needy, deserving or vulnerable than themselves for whom they should risk their wellbeing.

BlueDuck, as an aspiring public figure, felt a duty to maintain a public trans profile to be a possibility model, not just for other trans youth but for trans people of all ages:

> "there have also been many positives to speaking openly about my identity online; something which I try to do when I am not in danger, in order to support others also; with many of my older followers even coming to me ton tell me that I helped them find out something about themselves, and that they never knew it was possible to be transgender and a comedian (expressing in various cases that this knowledge would have led them to follow their dreams at a younger age)." – BlueDuck, 18

It is a truism of advocates for diversity in visible representation that "you can't be what you can't see" (Young,2018). Talking specifically about the importance of representation for trans youth, activist Morgan Page (2017) said of her project to promote historical trans figures: "If you never see anyone like you achieve anything like your dreams, it's easy to begin to think your dreams aren't possible." (Page, 2017, p.136). Page's use of historical trans figures as examples of possibility models circumvents the risk of visibility to the model as they are no longer living. However, it's arguable that the safety of the archive is also less likely to provide examples of the mundane, as unremarkable often equates to unrecorded. As shown in the earlier participant quotes, visibility of trans celebrities can be important as a source of access to protected trans joy, and the availability of professional trans influencer-educators offers reassurance, but the lack of other, less remarkable, types of representation can have a negative impact on trans youth through comparison.

As the feminist scholar Phelan (2003 [1993], p1) argues, visibility in the sphere of representation is often framed as displaying what is possible within the "boundaries of the putative real". Unfortunately, as Phelan notes, visibility does not equate to power, otherwise, to paraphrase her example, much of the world would be run by scantily-clad young women (p10). It is in this way that visibility politics can act as a trap, when it is assumed that visibility in and of itself has the power to lead to positive societal change (Gossett et al. 2018). Phelan did not disagree that visibility *can* be powerful but rather that the two were not correlated or unidirectional in relationship; visibility is often a trap

of surveillance and oppression, whereas invisibility can be powerful in the way in which it leaves identity unfixed (Young, 2018).

The positive potential of greater visibility widening what is possible for on-lookers, e.g. being a trans comedian, is then set against a lack of protection from the risk that comes from exposure, e.g. networked harassment, *and* the new boundaries of possibility accidentally set by the latest limits of representation, e.g. if all visible trans comedians are white, does that mean racialised trans people cannot be comedians?

8.4 Transnormativity

The pinning down and enclosure of identity that can come with visibility can be seen in the phenomenon of transnormativity. Bradford & Syed (2019) defined the features of a hegemonic transnormative narrative that works within trans populations as an alternative to the cisnormative master narrative that everyone is or should be, cisgender. Because cisnormativity is ubiquitous to the point of going unremarked upon, Bradford & Syed found participants needed very little prompting to speak at length about transnormativity compared to cisnormativity, as it seemed a more salient guiding narrative for trans identity development.

In addition to the medical model of transness and gender binarism addressed in terms of transnormativity thus far, Bradford & Syed add: prescriptive gender roles, an "always known" nascence of transness, victimization (i.e. wounded subjecthood), gatekeeping of transness by authority, and legitimacy parameters of "trans enough". In other words, the narrative of the "normal" trans person is as follows: someone who identifies as the binary gender other than the one assigned at birth and has done so from as early as they could express this. They have always taken part in gendered behaviour and presentation typical of their "acquired" gender and are heterosexual. They have faced much hardship and suffering, which proves their legitimacy as a trans subject, but that transition process, once completed, earns assimilation into cisheteronormative society.

Data found here aligns with existing literature on transnormativity such as Bradford & Syed (2019). Whilst participants described a diverse range of trans representations online, the pervasiveness of transnormativity in trans spaces was something many participants spoke of unprompted and at length as something they found alienating:

> "Personally, I find it hard to engage with trans communities online. I still do occasionally, but I'm often put off by how there seems to be a 'right' way to be a certain type of trans (I'm mostly talking about reddit here but it might happen in other places). For example, there seems to be a push for transfem people to be super feminine, act 'cutesy' and submissive, and vice versa for transmascs (to be clear it is totally valid to want to want to present like this). As a transfem person who doesn't present with super feminine clothing etc, it be a little annoying. I might be making a mountain out of a molehill here but that's just how I feel in those kind of online spaces." -GreyFox, 21

As GreyFox states, there is nothing inherently problematic about presenting "super" feminine or masculine; her discomfort comes from the apparent dominance of these norms, and the force of their transnormative narrative, which make her feel she is not doing trans femininity in the "right" way. Here GreyFox could be said to be describing the experience of occupying the "transgender dipping point" explored by Turner (2024), "which reflects and reinforces existing social hierarchies with trans communities.". It is a play on and consequence of the much-trumpeted "transgender tipping point" of 2014. As previously covered, the post-tipping point hypervisibility of trans people, without added protection (or representation without power, in Phelanian terms), increases the risk of being targeted for violence and discrimination generally. The "dipping point" focuses on the uneven distribution of this risk, in which some trans people are granted positive visibility and validity[27], but this is only extended to certain types of trans people; those most assimilable into cisheteronormativity through conformity to the transnormative narrative. The varied array of trans people whose experience of transness strays from this narrative are positioned somewhere in the dip of either the dangerous hypervisible position of "space invaders" (Turner, 2024) or invalidating neglect of invisibility (Johnson, 2016).

As we have already seen, the enforcement of transnormativity can be explicit through rejection and hostility, both from within and outside trans communities. In comparison, the dominance in visibility of transnormativity makes for a more subtle, implied exclusion that lets other trans people know they do not meet the conditions for mainstream acceptance, without it being any individual poster's fault:

> "I totally respect the people that want to post shirtless stuff, and I have found it useful when I started using trans tape to compare how they did it, but seeing

[27] Which must be extended to some trans people, otherwise no trans people would seek out trans visibility.

> trans people (usually the sort of 'typically attractive' type) can contribute to comparing yourself to others online, and has definitely caused some issues with my own self esteem. Being asexual, it can be hard to see trans people posting a lot of these 'sexy' type pictures too, since it almost makes me feel bad about not wanting that for myself.” -GreenShark, 19

Here GreenShark demonstrates what Turner (2024) describes as “the painful bind of being legible only through cisgender legibility” that “leaves trans individuals suspended – out of place, out of time and out of affect”. By not being assimilable into an allosexual, “typically attractive” binary masculinity, GreenShark’s self-esteem suffers from this alienation from transnormativity. Both GreenShark and GreyFox know that the trans people they see in these spaces are not responsible for their alienation, as evidenced by how they caveat and minimise their affective experience as they describe it. There is no landing place for their frustrations with the nebulous and ubiquitous nature of cisheteronormativity.

Bradford & Syed (2019) found resistance to transnormative narratives that sometimes became prescriptive narratives themselves by simply reversing the conditions of conditional acceptance to “distancing yourself as much as possible from the heteronormative patriarchal narrative that is our society” in order to be “queer enough”. Thus, a binary of normative vs queer trans counternarratives emerges, with the normative narrative dominating due to its proximity to the cis master narrative and the queer narrative defined in opposition to the normative narrative as an “intersectional deviation”. Both narratives create contrasting standards of “trans enough” that participants in the current study were aware of but rang false to most of their lived experiences or capacity for attainment. Instead, participants particularly valued representations of trans lives that chimed with their own experiences or ambitions regardless of how “normal” or “queer” they were:

> “i really like seeing the band Bears in Trees. It's 3 cis men and one non binary person and all of them just accept and affirm them constantly as soon as they came out. They present very masc so it's also great to see someone the opposite of me but similar in that we still present mostly as our gender assigned at birth, but are accepted by those around us. That definitely helped when I started coming out and saw that even though Ian doesn't look how non binary people are expected to look (which is dumb because it's literally NON binary but you know), their friends accept them and demand that others respect them too.” -BlueDog, 23

> "I notice that there's a group of trans people who everyone seems to follow, Aydian Dowling is the main one, his posts come up the most. I love his presence because he is the only one I've seen who is also a father and so often the idea of trans people's right to be parents seems more theoretical than actual- it's nice to see a real example of trans joy parenting." -BlueLobster, 20

Though they feel the weight of narratives of transness that rely on either assimilation or opposition to dominant norms, BlueDog and BlueLobster instead place value on signs of liveability in examples of individual trans lives: acceptance, respect, joy.

Thus, finding examples of visible trans lives that are either representational or aspirational to them as individuals can be a part of an agentic process of resistance to aspects of cisnormative, transnormative and queer "anti-normative" (Brightwell, 2018) narratives that are harmfully prescriptive (Bradford & Syed, 2019). However, depending on how much someone's transness departs from common narratives, it may be difficult and take time to find representations that speak to them, and as we have seen in previous quotes, having enough confidence in their identities to disregard expected norms is a long-term challenge. This is of particular concern in the case of trans youth, as Bradford & Syed (2019) suggest:

> "This process of questioning the legitimacy of one's own transgender experience using master narrative metrics may be particularly relevant to gender minority adolescents who may be developing transgender identities at an age where they lack the metacognitive skills to conceptualize transnormative expectations as culturally produced." (Bradford & Syed, 2019)

All participants in the current study displayed insight into the construction of these common narratives at the point of data collection, but many described this as a hard-won lesson for their younger selves via finding representations in more niche trans counterintimacies:

> "so much media shows nonbinary people as androgenous so it never occurred to me that I could still be that until I started interacting with people and posts that showed me I could." -BlueBee, 23.

8.5 Identity Flattening and Cruel Optimism

The above shows how transnormative visibility on social media may limit what forms of transness are seen as possible or liveable, despite superficially providing possibilities. Similarly, the experience of seeing the possibilities for visible trans people may lead to

the perception that being out as a trans person flattens viable options to being a trans person first, side-lining everything else:

> "I have heard it has been good for people just coming out to find stories on youtube, but having so many people making youtube videos now, it feels like the trans aspect of my identity (a football fan, an autistic person, a dual citizen, etc.) becomes the most important part and the only option for me is to take the 'influencer' route. As a trans man, most of the accounts I see are transmasc 'influencers' or social-media-famous trans people. I don't see a lot of trans people in careers other than that, or who don't have exercise videos posted, and it becomes a bit draining to see this Very Out trans excellence as a mostly stealth person who does not use social media nearly enough to go down the influencer career route." -BlueLobster, 20.

Here we see an example of how the kind of identity flattening contributed to by algorithmic forces (Devito, 2022) can become possibility-restricting. Airoldi (2021, p.134) argues that algorithms co-produce habitus with human users, and therefore define the limits of the thinkable. Tagging and categorisation for the benefit of the algorithm can make ambiguity and nuance invisible. If trans content creators must foreground their transness to be picked up and promoted in algorithmically partitioned trans filters, which are delivered to users who have been algorithmically profiled as trans, it is no wonder that this flattening comes to define the "boundaries of the putative real" (Phelan, 2003 [1993]).

In addition to the algorithmic simplifying of identities for ease of categorisation, it can be argued that the human side of this algorithm-human coproduction is heavily influenced by a transnormative politics of visibility in which representations of marginalised people are idealised to prove they are deserving of conditional acceptance, i.e. the model minority (Young, 2018). This liberal approach to trans activism presents making a career of "very out trans excellence" as a moral good as well as a route to a liveable life; as Gossett et al. (2018) say of trans visibility: "This is the trap of the visual: it offers—or, more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as—the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives."

Minority visibility as a career rather than merely a helpful form of possibility modelling has previously been explored by Lovelock (2017) in the context of gay and lesbian celebrity YouTubers. Lovelock connects homonormativity to neoliberalism in a manner that can also apply to transnormativity: the pressure to treat one's identity as a

marketable personal brand under the universalising capitalist logic of neoliberalism results in sexual minority content creators performing authenticity as a form of labour.

> "The ability for some specific gay and lesbian subjects to attain the symbolic validation of celebrity status sets out the formations of gay identity seemingly required for sexual minorities to prosper in a contemporary, western social context of apparent equality and acceptance for lesbian and gay subjects." (Lovelock, 2017)

Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" is used by Malatino (2022) to explore the appeal or otherwise of this image of "out trans excellence" as BlueLobster describes it. Cruel optimism refers to when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Berlant used examples of how the pursuit of the "good life" as presented by neoliberalism, that is individualist affluence and comfort, in the context of the impasse of constant crises and precarity caused by neoliberal capitalist life, impedes people from leading liveable lives.

Lovelock (2017) does not mention Berlant or cruel optimism, but it seems a natural synthesis when looking at the data here. If the visible examples of successful liveable trans lives are reserved for the small minority who have the capacity to perform the authenticity-labour of "out trans excellence" in relative safety, the majority who fall short of this transnormative version of the "good life", i.e. into the dipping point, will feel impeded by it.

It is not surprising that BlueLobster does not see "a lot of trans people in careers other than that" of a professionally out trans person online, when considering the level of hostility being trans online garners. This level of challenge makes the cost of making banal content about trans mundanity mostly prohibitive. This, combined with the algorithmic forces that demand identity flattening to pick up and promote content, means trans content creators must go "all in" on being professional trans influencers, narrowing the visible possibilities of liveability for trans youth consuming this content.

As addressed earlier, there is more variety in representations of trans life in safer online spaces, which are not fully public, but here other issues of cruel optimism were seen to emerge.

8.6 Envy

The prospect of becoming, or merely becoming like, a celebrity or social media influencer is simple to conceptualise as an ambition of cruel optimism; these are inherently aspirational figures with difficult-to-attain lifestyles presented in an idealised way. Concern about the cruel optimism of social media influencers and their followers is long established and not specific to trans people (e.g.Ashman et al. 2018).

More specific to marginalised experience is the cruel optimism of the desired outcome being a modest or basic need that, nonetheless, remains out of reach. In this data, seeing trans people with access to gender-affirming care, or other positive experiences unavailable to them, could become a source of distress:

> "I used to be really active on social media most especially Instagram however ended up deleting it as found it was just triggering me. I found it really hard to see people having a nice time when my mental health took a turn (and on the topic of trans things I also found it hard to see people who could afford private treatment and I couldn't). I felt like a lot of the time it didn't reflect reality and even tho the people I followed were my friends I still found it hard to remind myself it was just a small part of their life." -PinkPig, 18

In the above quote, PinkPig refers to the cost of private treatment; whilst gender-affirming care is technically available on the NHS, waiting lists for initial appointments with gender services are 5+ years long (Squires et al. 2024), so many trans people in the UK seek costly private treatment as the only practical option. Besides cost, both NHS and private gender care is gatekept by various assessments (unlike countries that use an informed consent model). As a result, many UK trans people seeking to medically transition spend many years in a period of waiting for access to gender-affirming care, either due to needing to raise funds or reach the top of waiting lists, then being approved through several stages of assessment. Getting past these barriers is not guaranteed, and so trans people in this situation often find themselves living on hold for a result that may never come, experiencing what Malatino describes as "future fatigue", that is becoming "worn out by your attachment to a future that is structurally foreclosed" (Malatino, 2022, p14). Malatino writes from primarily a US context, where, despite an informed consent model, the cost of private treatment and the lack of coverage by insurance companies for gender-affirming care are long-standing problems. These barriers are similar enough to the UK for his analysis to apply here.

In such a situation, where the thing keeping one's life on hold is unevenly distributed and unfairly denied, Malatino formulates trans envy as a response to inequality: "the most bread and roses of affects" (Malatino, 2022, p. 83). It is unsurprising that seeing others being able to access healthcare that he can't afford can become hard for PinkPig to bear. Whilst PinkPig describes one of the many difficult "crabs in a barrel" (Malatino, 2022, p.49; Peters, 2016) emotions of t4t relationality in the form of envy, he does not report engaging in intracommunity conflict in response, instead attempting to contextualise the issue and removing himself from the triggering content.

It is worth noting that PinkPig does not let this negative affect prevent him from taking part in commoning practices such as the monitoring of far-right networks (addressed further in Data Chapter 4 on transphobia). Whilst the transgender dipping point accentuates the uneven distribution of resources and hardships amongst trans people (Turner, 2024), this unevenness is not necessarily correlated with a level of commitment to commoning practices. Many participants expressed an obligation to contribute to what Malatino (2022) calls "t4t love in the interregnum", a trans praxis of care for surviving future fatigue whilst being institutionally unsupported, regardless of whether they lacked resources or described themselves as lucky or more resilient compared to other trans people.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the affective trap doors participants described related to trans visibility on social media. Visibility of day-to-day trans experience opened doors to models for liveable trans lives, but a of lack of public safety could turn this into a trap, especially when coupled with a sense of obligation to be publicly trans for the sake of an imagined trans counterintimacy.

Celebrities and influencers, as hypervisible trans figures, open doors to witnessing trans joy achieve a high-profile and normalising trans lives in the wider affective public. This hypervisibility comes with the trap of high-profile backlash against all trans people, the brunt of which the most successful celebrities can insulate themselves against with greater resources than their trans followers. However, participants also turned to celebrities and influencers to reduce the labour of developing responses to this backlash through consuming their educational content on pro-trans arguments.

Some participants felt obliged to serve as possibility models with their visibility, especially following feedback that their visibility had helped others, but in addition to the increased vulnerability that comes with visibility without protection, the demographics of who can weather these risks may inadvertently set new possibility limits through new narratives of normativity. Trends in trans visibility led to traps of transnormativity in which those who did not see themselves represented felt like they were being trans “the wrong way” until they found alternative examples.

Participants often described the trans people most visible online as examples of liveable trans lives as tending to be those most assimilable into cisheteronormativity (allosexual, conventionally attractive, etc.), thus alienating participants who don’t want that, and leading to cruel optimism in those who do. Despite the difficult feelings brought up by aspects of trans visibility, especially for those who could be said to inhabit the trans dipping point, there remained a widespread commitment to t4t commoning practices.

9 Data Chapter 3: Negative Vortextuality

9.1 Introduction

The last two chapters weigh essential and beneficial affordances of social media against their drawbacks and risks regarding identity work, emotional support and visibility. By contrast, this chapter will examine the distinctly non-utopic experiences participants describe of the vortextuality (Cavalcante, 2020, Whannel, 2010) of negative trans content on social media, in which algorithmic folk theories (Devito, 2022) are deployed by participants to explain the role algorithms play in flattening and delivering trans content. This interacts with an affective sense of obligation to contribute to trans counterintimacies and engage with negative trans content. The substance of negative trans content described by participants falls into 3 themes: bad trans news, trans people expressing negative emotions and vicarious transphobia.

To account for the temporal stickiness of this engagement, rather than the discreet flurries of traditional vortextuality, Chun's (2016) digital formula built on Berlant's (2011) conception of the impasse: "habit + crisis = update", is utilised to analyse the compulsive nature of engagement with negative social media content, described by several participants as "doomscrolling". To work with the trans-specific negativity reported by participants that differentiates it from general neoliberal crises of precarity described by Berlant and Chun, the intergroup emotion of belonging to a trans counterintimacy is integrated.

Participants describe tactics for taking breaks from these vortexes, which can form cycles of engagement and breaks similar to traditional formulations of vortextuality. Sedgwick's (1997) model of shifting between paranoid and depressive positions is applied to this and the chapter concludes with a depressed trans reading of cycles of negative vortextuality.

9.2 Algorithms

A common theme in the data was discussion of the algorithms that are a feature of every prominent social media platform. As the research covered in the literature review would lead to be expected, participants in this project were hyperaware of the influence of

social media algorithms on what they see, and the resulting impact on their mental and emotional state:

> "I find that being trans influences how I use social media in terms of the algorithm. I don't think I go out of my way very much to find trans content I think it has progressively become part of my feed so I don't have a choice in it anyway. Sometimes it means I actually have to take a break because what I'm seeing is all trans news (mostly bad news these days) and it makes me dysphoric." – BlueLobster, 20

> "tiktok, great for creative content and also weirdly as a learning platform for crafts ect, but i shouldn't spend too long on it otherwise the algorithm sends me self deprecating videos of miserable young trans teens being unhappy :(" – RedHerring, 19

The theory of "algorithmic identity flattening" expressed by participants in the above quotes is also something that Devito (2022) found amongst transfem TikTok creators, that once categorised into a trans filter bubble, they had to mention their trans identity in their content for it to be "picked up" and promoted by the algorithm, disincentivising nuanced or intersectional presentations of themselves. Here participants expressed the other side of this theory as content consumers, that, having been categorised as trans by platform algorithms (whilst RedHerring names TikTok, BlueLobster primarily used Instagram, while other participants who mention algorithms referred to both these, Reddit and Twitter [now X]) they experience a progressive flattening to the range of content they see. This flattening was addressed in the last chapter in the context of the lack of variety *within* trans content, but here is also examined in terms of the paucity of anything *outside* of trans content. This could be described as trans filter bubbles forming against the will of trans users, even when their interest is primarily something else. However, the term "bubble" arguably evokes too insulating and comfortable an image to capture what participants describe here as being bombarded with a single, negative theme.

9.3 Intergroup emotion

Algorithms may structure what is seen and by whom, but humans, as members of affective publics, and in this case, counterintimacies, are producing and engaging with this content, which participants also saw as contributing to the negative affective drag of their social media filters.

In Intergroup Emotions Theoy (IET) in victimology, shared social identity within community groups is thought to be the basis of the vicarious negative impact of hateful behaviour, as people self-categorise as having something fundamental in common with others in their community, an attack on one group member is felt as an attack on all group members as the shared quality is the aspect under attack (Walters et al. 2020). Indeed, intending this communicated harm to the whole group may be a motivator behind such attacks, especially when social media can spread the news and, therefore, the impact of such attacks so quickly and far afield (Pickles, 2021). As described below, in the case of trans people this goes beyond individual hate incidents to institutional level hostility such as anti-trans legislation.

Malatino (2022) described the tendency in trans affective commons to amplify distress as empathetic witnessing and a part of a t4t praxis of care. At the scale of social media, this could have the unintended consequence of adding to fatigue, as the incidents worthy of outrage are never-ending in a global trans network, e.g. Todd (2023) found UK trans youth described experiences of exhaustion associated with this endless hostility.

> "i've been lucky to have not experienced much direct harassment, but seeing peopel talk constantly about their experiences does take a toll." -OrangeZebra, 20

Intergroup emotion "takes a toll" when people are talking about transphobia "constantly", possibly motivated to get traction in wider affective publics in an attention economy of competing social issues (Westbrook, 2020), or to seek/give care in trans counterintimacies (Malatino, 2022), or both. This combines with an identity-flattening algorithmic undertow that filters and directs similar content, creating a human and algorithmic co-production that leads to what is formulated below as negative vortextuality, in which trans counterintimacy membership interacts with algorithmic currents to deliver an overwhelming flow of parasocial negative experiences.

9.4 Negative trans content

The content participants described as making up this algorithmically-driven human-produced negativity can broadly be categorised into a combination of bad trans news, of trans people expressing negative emotions and vicarious transphobia in the form of

other users experiencing or expressing transphobia; hereafter, when discussing the combination of this type of content it will be described as "negative trans content"[28].

9.4.1 Bad Trans News

Participants described many positives to membership of trans counterintimacies (examined in previous data chapters), but one of the downsides commonly expressed was the experience of seeing lots of news stories about anti-trans laws, policies, statements and violent crimes and feeling these as identity threats:

> "For me my transness is a particular response to forces I feel wanting to homogenise me into some large mass, and in this sense gives me a distance between a lot of the beauty ideals I see on social media. The flip side of this is that I take it impossibly personally when I hear news about changing laws, statistics about public opinion or celebrities making statements" – GoldenWeevil, 22

Here GoldenWeevil explicitly pins down the ambivalence inherent in rejecting the normalising pressures of a "homogenous" dominant public only to experience the social identity threat of belonging to a stigmatised group. This felt membership of trans counterintimacies transcends borders and leads to a "we" that feels the impact of bad trans news from all over the world:

> "Obviously, the negative aspects can start to take over if I don't carefully watch how long I spend scrolling. Many online spaces get overloaded with negative news stories, especially with all the stuff happening over in the USA at the minute, it can be disheartening to see." – GreenShark, 19

This is consistent with the history of the internet being used by trans people to create an international counterintimacy, and Malatino (2022) and Westbrook's (2020) conception of trans negativity being foundational to this. This universal trans subject can risk decontextualising geographic and demographic specificities and neglecting intersecting compounders e.g. the transnecropolitics of TDoR (see footnote 12). Thus, algorithms can have an identity flattening effect whilst simultaneously acting as an "infrastructure of intimacy" (Paasonen et al. 2023). This is not to say that bad trans news is only ever vicarious in the UK, as discussed in the context section, there are regular news items

[28] Direct transphobia and hostility also feature significantly in the data, but personal harassment was assessed as having a distinct affective and experiential quality to navigating a general environment of negative trans content, so will be addressed separately in Data Chapter 4.

directly affecting trans youth in this country. Rather, it is to point out that the weight of the world's bad trans news is added to the local and personally relevant.

This affective salience can be seen in how participants not only attributed bad trans news as being pushed by algorithms but also shared by others in their networks:

> "People sharing news of transphobia is important, but you're often faced with it as soon as you open the app since it's so important to share. It can be quite jarring to open tumblr for some fandom scrolling and be confronted with yet another attack on your identity" – BlueBee, 23

Whilst it was common for participants to say the sharing of bad-trans news is important, the nature of this importance was rarely specified, but was occasionally described as "raising awareness". This sharing of trans negativity thus appeared to be recognised by participants as an act intended to be of the type of infrapolitical ethics of care described by Malatino (2020, p.120) as central to a trans affective public. The limits of usefulness of awareness raising, especially on social media, will be explored by revisiting Sedgwick's (1997) hermeneutics of suspicion later in the chapter.

Despite this understood community-oriented intent of content sharing, all participants who mentioned bad-trans news content, even those who caveated its importance, reported it having a negative impact on them due to its omnipresence:

> "I think because I follow a lot of trans people I get too absorbed with negative headlines and tragedies because they are being constantly reposted into the trans echo chamber. It can become quite draining." – RedHerring, 19

This draining effect appears to evidence Westbrook's (2020) argument that the wounded subjectivity of trans publics diminishes the felt liveability of trans lives.

9.4.2 Trans people expressing negative emotions

In addition to RedHerring being presented with "miserable young trans teens" by the algorithm, BlueLobster notes the affordances of social media combined with intracommunity conventions for expressing trans negativity at no one in particular, as discussed in Data Chapter 1, contributes to the abundance of this type of content for the algorithm to pick up:

> "it's easy to trauma dump into the void that is the internet and expect people to read it or see it and getting upset when not everyone can engage with it. Coming out stories, bullying in schools, that kind of thing….a lot of the time LGBT spaces

> can become very heavy and can draw you into a lot of other young people's trauma.” -BlueLobster, 20

This is consistent with findings of my previous research (Simms, 2020) that a lot of trans youth’s tweets about mental health functioned as a public diary posted “into the void” with no direct addressee and were rarely responded to.

Dobson et al. (2018, p.12) refer to instances of “oversharing” online as “intimacy glitches” which challenge social norms, and this prompts them to call for a critical examination of why the social norms exist rather than shaming the sharer. As covered in the exploration of transnormativity in the last chapter, when what would be a glitch in the dominant affective public becomes normative for a counterintimacy, this can lead to harmful narratives regarding life expectations and the limits of what is possible.

9.4.3 Vicarious transphobia

Whilst the previous two themes often involved vicarious transphobia ranging from state to personal levels, this is not necessarily the case, e.g. news of trans pop star SOPHIE dying in an accident (Brown, 2021), or a trans person venting about something not directly related to transness. Whereas, even with most participants expressing the tactics they use to avoid direct harassment (addressed in Data Chapter 4), whether that is using features of the platform or self-censorship, most participants described still being exposed to a great deal of vicarious transphobia in the form of seeing other trans people targeted or encountering transphobic narratives. Participants who shared intersecting identities with those targeted felt it particularly keenly:

> “I'm a (Muslim) Pakistani trans man living in the UK, and I feel like the intersection of these two parts of my identity impact my social media experience the most. I find that it's incredibly difficult to find people who have similar experiences to me due to this intersection, and also that I'm more of an outcast because of them. White queer people will call me homophobic and transphobic (despite being gay and trans) because I'm a Muslim, but the Muslim/Pakistani community will say that I'm not a real Muslim or that my existence is a sign that the day of judgement is coming (so random). It's so disheartening because I have such a special relationship with the queer community AND religion, and the people who I thought would be like my family on both parts of that identity reject me. The reason I bring this up in response to this question is that the majority of this sort of hate I see is when I find a queer brown content creator and look at responses to their content/comments on their videos. It's awful because I get so excited about finally finding someone who's experienced the same things as I have, but seeing the terrifying lack of support for them in comparison to cishet brown

> creators, or white queer creators makes me feel like there's something severely wrong with me more than any other transphobia or islamophobia I've experienced. It makes me realise that if that's how we're treated, that's not something I want to be, so rather than trying to combat the hatred and support them myself to build this community, I get scared and stay silent."- OrangeStingray, 17

Here we see the power of "absence as an active force" (Alderman, 2024). In this case, the absence of support for victimised "brown queer content creators" is profoundly affecting to OrangeStingray's sense of self more than the hate that is present. The feeling of trans subjecthood being unliveable is compounded by the apparent abandonment of multiply-marginalised trans people by the flattening (whitening) of identity. The next data chapter will explore counter-speech to transphobia in depth.

The scale of algorithms contribution to vicarious trans-hostility in the participants experiences of social media was not only through presenting flows of trans-hostile content to them, but also through the engagement on that content in the form of features such as likes, meaning users aren't just seeing a trans-hostile post, but also that it has hundreds or thousands of people condoning it:

> "I find it really disheartening coming across something online while scrolling, if it's a known celebrity or a smaller content creator, the like number of support in likes and comments can be really frustrating. I'm lucky to live in an entirely queer household where 1/6 are cis and knowing that the people I respect don't think in the way these people (online) do and that has more value to me then some sh*tty comedian on reels. It only works if you refuse to rationalise the actual number of people. Its hard to think of a collective of like 25K + people anyway but knowing that they all think similarly it can get scary I guess." -BlueCrab, 21

An algorithmic filter that lacks qualitative discernment thus promotes trans-related content that has a lot of engagement to users likely to engage in such content, regardless of whether the content or its audience are trans or passionately trans-hostile (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2018), thus throwing both groups together and presenting trans users with frightening numbers of people who "like" transphobia ("25k+"), a scale of hatred that is difficult to comprehend. This phenomenon is not unique to the trans/trans-hostile dynamic, malicious engagement with social media posts to display schadenfreude is widespread, but research finds it is particularly common when aimed at marginalised communities (Phillips, 2024).

Ahmed's concept of the affect alien (Ahmed, 2010a) describes the experience of appearing to have a different affective orientation to everyone else in a situation. When trans people see thousands of likes on a transphobic comedy skit or similar anti-trans post, their fear and frustration makes affect aliens of them. Ahmed describes the affect alien as the precursory position to becoming the feminist killjoy, in being steadfast in refusal to convene with others happiness in sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia etc. the feminist killjoy becomes a "spoilsport" whose alien orientation is framed as the origin of bad feeling, rather than the thing that caused their alienation: "The violence of what was said, the violence of provocation, goes unnoticed" (Ahmed, 2010a, p.65). Being a killjoy is a tiring position in the contexts that Ahmed often describes, the family dinner table, the office meetings, etc., the frequently evoked "banging your head against a brick wall" (ibid, p.84) of attempting to get others to acknowledge the problem that is rarely successful.

The scale of social media introduces an extra level of helplessness to this alienation, in discreet contexts, be they AFK or in online walled gardens, affect aliens have the agency to make the choice to become killjoys, regardless of how strained the communication or unsatisfactory the result. However, the trans young person scrolling social media is unable to reach the thousands of people who have reacted with a thumbs up or laughing emoji to a transphobic joke, nor would it likely be worth the risk to attempt. As a result of this inability to respond as a killjoy at the scale at which this alienation occurs, we see alternative responses from participants. BlueCrab describes a "refusal" to value these thousands who hold transphobic views over the members of their small queer household, however "irrational" this may be from a numbers perspective.

This refusal to consider the human scale of transphobia presented to them fits with Malatino's (2022) examination of disassociation, numbness and withdrawal as trans technologies of survival in the face of the disorientating experience of being dehumanised. Malatino builds on Ahmed's work on the "uneven distribution" of disorientation, that "some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis." (Ahmed, 2006, p.159), by detailing common trans forms of being disorientated by how "the world in which we find ourselves is constructed in ways that refuse, exclude, elide, or overwrite our sense of existence." (Malatino, 2022: 54). As we can see from BlueCrab's quote, they are not describing one incident, but a disorientating

and alienating experience they are repeatedly exposed to “while scrolling”. Due to the algorithmic promotion of such content, it appears unavoidable without logging off, and as previously mentioned, countering it by becoming a killjoy is often either impractical or unsafe due to the number of people involved. This makes disassociating and mentally withdrawing, refusing to think of that number, a tactic for being able to remain on these platforms without being overwhelmed by the disorientation of hostility from thousands of people towards their group in the wider affective public, or in other words, pulled under by the algorithmic undertow and drowning in the dipping point of intergroup emotion. Material tactics, to join affective withdrawal, were also described by participants for the purpose of minimising the negative impact of this negative trans content and are examined later in the chapter. In the meantime, it is notable that BlueCrab describes themselves as lucky to have access to an AKF environment of a trans and queer household to value, instead of acknowledging the hate of all those strangers, and conjures the question of the effect of the same exposure to hatred on trans youth who are not lucky enough to live in such an environment.

Another response in the data to the scale of hostility algorithms can present users with was to use that knowledge to be mindful of their potential impact on others:

> “I'm fairly careful about my digital footprint. Not obsessively but I'm always aware of what I'm showing support for even with something as simple as a liked post (as like blue(?)) Said above when you see a collective going against you, visualising that many people against you is scary - and I don't want to replicate that.” GreenGriffin, 21

This is an example of a depressed trans position in which a source of bad feeling is seen both as a mundane feature of day-to-day life, and empathetically framed as something everyone has the capacity for.

9.5 Vortextuality

The finding that participants reported this unending flurry of negative trans content seems to align with the concept of a vortextuality of filter bubbles, but unlike the “queer utopia” Cavalcante (2020) found on Tumblr, negativity is inescapable rather than forbidden. Despite being felt to flatten and silo content, algorithmic filters were not experienced as insulating bubbles of validation. Whilst their exact coding may be obscure, algorithms calculate what users should see based on what they, and/or those

they categorise as belonging to the same group, engage with (hence "people who bought this also bought…" categories in online shops), and positive emotions are not the only affective responses that lead people to engage with content (e.g. Ryan, 2012). As will be detailed later in this chapter, participants reported often engaging with negative trans content out of anxiety, anger or distress, even when they knew this would be bad for their sense of well-being and tried to avoid this type of content.

Looking at this result with Malatino's (2022) argument that the trans affective commons is one bound by negative affect, it is not surprising that once the algorithm of a social media platform categorises a user as trans, and appears to prioritise this categorisation, the promoted content trends towards negativity. Personal identification with the subject of this vortex of negative content attaches the trans user as a member of the trans counterintimacy.

The algorithmic contribution to this negative vortex is not necessarily unavoidable; some participants talked of training, or attempting to train, the algorithm to behave in, if not positive, at least non-harmful ways:

> "I think I've cultivated my recommendations on most sites well enough to be trans positive or just irrelevant (like videos of pets, or people fixing their cars)" – GreeenGriffin, 21

This is an example of what Devito (2022) terms an *actionable* algorithmic folk theory, in which users develop theories about platform algorithms which are useful for curating their experience. This contrasts with *demotivational* algorithmic folk theories, in which users develop theories about ways the algorithm works which are inherently detrimental to their experience and so lower their satisfaction with the platform:

> "Even when the algorithm should know I don't want to engage in news-type content or far-right posts, I still get them recommended (and I still end up reading all the hateful comments lol)." – PinkPig, 18

GreenGriffin's experience that algorithms can be trained to provide the content they want, thus works as an actionable folk theory, whereas PinkPig's belief that the algorithm knows what content he doesn't want, but provides it regardless because he engages with it, is a demotivational theory. In the case of BlueLobster and RedHerring at the start of the chapter, this same sense of a lack of agency in the algorithm promoting unwanted content is demotivational to the point of logging off.

PinkPig's sense that algorithm "should know" what he doesn't want to engage with, despite him engaging with it anyway, implies a wish for algorithms to be smarter, and thus arguably creepier, in their ability to make value judgements and employ emotional safeguards, rather than consistently displaying the fundamental indifference of algorithms to affective quality. An alternative to smarter algorithms could be greater human input and control, as will be explored in Data Chapter 5.

That algorithms would be emotionally indifferent may seem an obvious point, as machines are not sentient, however, as Airoldi (2021) argues in *Machine Habitus,* culture is reflected in the way algorithms are coded, and vice versa, in an entwined and reinforcing sociotechnical spiral. This means that the priorities of algorithms reflect the priorities of the people who build them, resulting in existing societal inequalities being embedded in technology[29]. In short, algorithms "care" about what they are coded by people to care about.

Social media platforms are often criticised for prioritising keeping users engaged without regard for their wellbeing, resulting in issues such as the formation of self-harm/suicidality filter bubbles for vulnerable users who show an interest in this content. A high-profile example of this was the 2017 death by suicide of 14-year-old Molly Russell, for which the coroner held algorithmic social media partially responsible (Chayka, 2024). Russell's father described the records of her activity on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest as a "vortex of despair" (Milmo, 2022). Whilst records showed Russell searched for depression and suicide-related content, it also showed the platforms subsequently recommending this content to her, most notoriously an email from Pinterest titled "depression pins you may like", including an image of a bloody razor (Chayka, 2024). Russell's father's use of the word "vortex" appears to map exactly onto vortextuality, with the coroner in the case concluding that the algorithmic social media feeds drove "binge periods" on depression and suicide content automatically delivered to Russell right up until her death (Chayka, 2024).

[29] such as well documented incidents of "racist" technology in which all-white development teams did not consider Black users, or where algorithms have been trained on datasets created by racist humans (Benjamin, 2019).

Another example of algorithms presenting one type of content to the point of harm that several participants described noticing, despite not being trans-related or something they sought out, was eating disorder content:

> “instagram kept recommending eating disorder "recovery" accounts that had loads of images of people who were at very low weights (not saying it was those peoples' fault for sharing photos of themselves on the internet while they were experiencing mental health problems at all btw). It's just really easy to go down the spiral on apps like instagram.” – PinkPig, 18
>
> “I agree with PinkPig that online content seems to get way more ED-ey than you'd expect after just a while of scrolling.” -FluorescentBeetle, 18

This also demonstrates the limitations of moderation; the content described is overtly “recovery” focused, so would not be identified as harmful, and it would not necessarily be helpful if it were (especially for the content creators, as PinkPig points out, it’s not the fault of individual posters if the algorithm has promoted an unhealthy deluge of similar images of underweight people). Indeed, the representative for Meta at the coroner’s court in Russell’s case defended the individual pieces of content Russell was presented with as other posters “sharing their feelings” and “raising awareness” (Milmo, 2022). In the same way, there is nothing necessarily harmful to others about “miserable young trans teens” expressing themselves on social media, but an algorithmic vortex of this type of content can be experienced as harmful by the user, especially if affective recognition attaches them to a common counterintimacy. Rather than the content itself, the problem can be argued to centre on the algorithmic indifference to the harm that a vortex of similar content can cause, and what Chayka (2024, p.428) calls “algorithmic overreach” without human oversight.

Several algorithm theorists have argued (Rouvroy, 2011; Chun, 2016, p.59) that the way learning algorithms prioritize user action over words, i.e. engagement behaviours over expressed desires, values the action of engagement as representing the “true” self, whereas conscious intent is disregarded, making it more difficult to change habits and build new routines. It does not matter that participants explicitly do not want to see far-right or eating disorder content; that they linger over and/or engage with this content is the only data that will train the algorithms on their “true” desires.

Whilst this disregarding of conscious autonomy and insistence on being a better authority on people than they are on themselves is indiscriminate, for trans youth in

particular this is echoed throughout the rest of their lives; especially when it comes to their gender and access to affirming care, from their personal lives (Shook et al. 2024) through to public discourse (Pang et al. 2021). This is increasingly the case in the UK, where recent legal cases and government decisions appear to judge trans youth to lack capacity as default (e.g. the puberty blocker ban only applied to trans youth and draft school transition guidance recommending parental consent).

9.6 Doomscrolling

As detailed in the literature review, the algorithmically driven feed model of social media platforms has the potential to keep users engaged, scrolling content indefinitely (Lupinacci, 2021). Depending on the users' context, this can lead to a behaviour that has been termed "doomscrolling", that is, long periods spent scrolling on content about bad/anxiety-provoking news. Literature on doomscrolling is still sparse; the term was coined to describe the behaviour as it became noticeably widespread in 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic began, and the majority of published work on doomscrolling across disciplines still relates to the virus (e.g. Price et al. 2022, Salisbury, 2023, Sharma et al. 2022).

The above section describes a vortex of negative trans content that is driven by algorithms and attaches to affect via counterintimacy membership. An aspect that has only been mentioned in passing thus far is the temporal quality of this engagement. Whilst vortextuality has previously been formulated as intense flurries of engagement with any one type of content followed by cooling off periods, doomscrolling explicitly involves negativity and factors in seemingly compulsive, lengthy engagement.

Participants described doomscrolling on a range of endless feed-style social media platforms, often in the context of recognising it as a problem and trying to do so less:

> "I used to use Snapchat and Insta but now I predominantly just use whattsapp, I think view snap as a more direct messaging system for meeting ppl etc but insta is kinda more doomscrolling." -FluorescentBeetle, 18
>
> "twitter was used for academic purposes, though i kept getting into doomscrolling on anti-trans stuff, so i've reduced my usage a lot." – OrangeZebra, 20
>
> "i use tiktok but whenever im on it im very aware of how much time is going by with me doing nothing and should probably delete it tbh - especially as it used to be fun and now its much more like doomscrolling." – GreenGriffin, 21

Many participants spoke of difficulty logging off or taking breaks from this type of content, getting stuck scrolling and engaging with negative trans content. Often, compulsion or addiction-related language was used, or participants cited a sense of obligation to other trans people, or both:

> "I agree with feeling a need to keep scrolling and know what's going on, but I also feel a need to fight against hate comments and show the world that trans and non-binary people are not horrible or unnatural. I can't seem to stop myself from looking and commenting on things." -BlackCat, 24

In a phenomenological study of a range of Londoner's experiences of social media use Lupinacci (2021) noted a similar phenomenon she terms "responsibility and response-ability" in which participants felt obligation to their identified community, whether this was their personal network, or a more abstract concept like their country, not only to stay up-to-date (responsibility) but also to issue timely responses as things happen (response-ability). Whilst what BlackCat describes could be described as a felt sense of responsibility and response-ability (Lupinacci, 2021) to the trans community, the stickiness of not being able to stop points to more than just an obligation to t4t care.

Returning to the sentiment expressed by participants that bad trans news is "important to share" to "raise awareness" plus this compulsion to "keep scrolling and know what's going on", leads us to Sedgwick's question from her analysis of paranoid reading:

> "What does knowledge do—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?" (Sedgwick, 1997, p.4).

Sedgwick (1997) argues that a hermeneutics of suspicion is based in faith that knowing and spreading news of injustice will automatically lead to positive change, or at the very least is "self-evidently a step in that direction" (p.17); the widespread knowledge of such facts and nothing resulting from that knowledge is not permitted for consideration.

Participants who described this faith in the importance of sharing negative trans content imply the beneficiary being an imagined other, who, unlike them, would otherwise be unaware of the transphobia in the world, as they acknowledge the personal impact of unending repeat exposure is negative. Or if they are to benefit themselves, it will be when a critical mass of knowledge prompts change.

As Sedgwick points out, this faith in sunlight as a disinfectant when it comes to oppression does not account for how some forms of violence are "from the beginning

exemplary and spectacular, pointedly addressed, meant to serve as a public warning or terror to members of a particular community" (Sedgwick, 1997, p.18). This has become increasingly clear in recent years as the escalation of the culture war in popular politics has led to highly publicised acts of injustice towards marginalised groups in which "the cruelty is the point" (Souris, 2024).

In this study, paranoid positioning in participants can be argued to contribute to doomscrolling; the algorithmic and networked delivery of negative trans content would likely not be so entrapping if it weren't for an affective orientation towards "a need to keep scrolling and know what's going on", even though the person who is compulsively scrolling is prevented from doing anything else, except perhaps resharing content for other people to anxiously scroll.

Even if some positive outcomes did come from spreading awareness of negative trans content, participants often found such content did not seem to do the job of escaping trans counterintimacies to wider publics, leading some to question how possible awareness-raising on social media can be in the age of highly-personalised filter bubbles:

> "because of the algorithm and having mostly trans friends, I see a lot of the same news on peoples stories over and over. However, when I mention these things to cis friends, they're surprised because they don't see those stories unless I send them. This means that although the articles and posts have the best intentions of raising awareness, they are only reaching trans people and making us more anxious about the deluge of content." – BlueLobster, 20

In this way, membership of a trans counterintimacy ("having mostly trans friends") results in repetitive content, but this also interacts with the algorithmic filter bubble that forms around trans users on social media which appears to act as a dampener on the potential of empathic witnessing that "carries significant force when it is collectivised, when it is able to amplify, resonate, and echo" (Malatino, 2022, p.131). If there are barriers in the architecture of platforms that strangle the amplification of content outside of their algorithmic categorisation, we are left primarily with the echo bouncing back on trans users who are already well aware of the issues they face. This is consistent with RedHerring's conception of the "trans echo chamber" from their quote in the bad news section, rather than an echo chamber of agreement, it is an echo chamber of bad news. It is therefore not surprising that participants described feeling drained and anxious by the picture of unliveable trans life that is endlessly repeated as trans networks

attempt to break through the trans filter bubble to gain purchase in the "social problems marketplace" (Westbrook, 2020) of the wider affective public.

Chun (2016) discusses a more general iteration of this ironic phenomenon of attempts by internet users to protect their community contributing more to negative content, with the example of chain emails warning of computer viruses becoming far more viral than the original virus. The warnings themselves became well-intended "retroviruses" spread via the asynchronistic nature of the posting patterns of overlapping but differing personal networks.

This asynchronistic sending and receiving, combined with algorithmic promotion in the case of social media, means that there is no finite landing place for these posts, with similar users seeing the same posts repeatedly ("I see a lot of the same news on peoples stories over and over"). This prevents users from being able to access information once from a stable place and then put it aside, as with static sources like newspapers. Although the information remains accessible, stored in digital memory, it is also repeated, albeit by different accounts, in the same feed as novel information, meaning the social media user has to scroll through repeated information as they seek new information. As Chun summarises it:

> "memory, which once promised to save users from time, makes them out of time by making them respond constantly to information they have already responded to, to things that will not disappear." (Chun, 2016, p.78)

In the example of a virus-warning chain email, users could disregard the repeated warnings as, at worst, an irritation and waste of time. However, with the advent of COVID-19 and doomscrolling, and in this case of trans youth and the "deluge" of negative trans content, the threat is personal and existential, and thus has a profoundly different, "absorbing" negative affective quality that needs to be accounted for.

9.7 Impasse of doomscrolling the vortex

Berlant's (2011) concept of "crisis ordinariness" leading to an "impasse" is relevant here. Berlant (2011) argues that the neoliberal present consists of "systemic crisis", a struggle and hypervigilance against constant precariousness that marginalised people must acclimate to as "a steady hum of livable crisis ordinariness" or be destroyed by it (p.196). Berlant themself noted how the internet contributes to crisis ordinariness with ubiquitous, intensifying pressure to respond to never-ending demands (post something, click on a link, send an email) (ibid, p.261), but Chun (2016) develops this with the

concept of the "update": "Crises make the present a series of updates in which we race to stay close to the same and in which information spreads not like a powerful, overwhelming virus, but rather like a long, undead thin chain" Chun (2016, p.3).

We can see the result of this continuous series of updates in the participants' description of doomscrolling on social media, a frequently repetitive endless feed of negativity that comes to feel not only ordinary but necessary:

> "I often feel like when I'm feeling bad about stuff I'm reading online, I'm kind of unable to stop. I am more prone to continue scrolling as part of reassurance seeking. Obviously this only makes it worse, but I can't seem to stop myself. Its a behaviour that overinflates my internet use and general anxiety. The only way I can really stop is just by distracting myself with something else. Mostly I try to just avoid content that might set me off." – GreyFox, 21

Here, GreyFox illustrates Berlant's formulation of the impasse, the anxious pressure to act during an unending crisis with no foreseeable conclusion or solution, which becomes an ordinary way of being:

> "An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading." (Berlant, 2011, p.199)

In GreyFox's quote we can clearly see the impasse of doomscrolling in how the constant scrolling of social media feeds functions as a form of "dogpaddling" which is difficult to stop due to the continual updates on the crises (negative trans content) and attendant affective intensity (anxiety).

If not defined by crisis, social media habits may simply become habitual, the "absentmindedly scrolling through nothing" (Lupinacci, 2021) that research has found in the general population's social media use outside the context of doomscrolling. Crises are usually opportunities for habit change due to being disruptive, but the constant crisis that contributes to the update, in Chun's (2016) formulation, "deprives habit of its ability to habituate" (p.85). Thus, habitually scrolling content on long-term crises with no foreseeable conclusion (and therefore continually updating, Chun's formula being "habit + crisis = update"), whether pandemics or escalating trans hostility, holds users at an impasse of affective intensity demanding activity, whilst kept engaged in an environment where possible actions are limited to the affordances the platforms provide (scroll, like, comment, post) which, within neoliberal platform capitalism, are

invariably options that individualise users, and in so doing makes collective action harder (Cross, 2024).

Data Chapters 1 & 2 showed that there is a wide variety in online trans and queer counterintimacy experiences, many providing vital and affirming benefits. The data in this chapter shows that algorithmic undertow and counterintimacy attachment can interact to pull trans users from these beneficial aspects into a vortex of negative trans content. This vortex becomes difficult to escape due to the impasse of dogpaddling on never-ending updates from a paranoid position that a hermeneutics of suspicion will keep their heads above water.

The trans-specificity of this model is somewhat difficult to differentiate from Chun's (2016) more general "habit + crisis = update", arguably due to the way it complements Malatino's (2022) theory of a trans affective commons that is bound by negative affect, which is also heavily reliant on Berlant's concept of the impasse (and cruel optimism, as explored in the previous chapter). The trans-specificity appears to be in the location of the crises in intergroup emotion that personalises the anxiety of broader threats and a sticky sense of obligation to the trans counterintimacy. Whether this is the case for other marginalised groups and their online counterintimacies would require further comparative study.

9.8 Harm Mitigation Tactics

Most participants expressed a well-understood need to escape, even temporarily, from the negativity of their social media feeds, with a variety of tactics used with varying efficacy. In Data Chapter 1, Multitooling multiple platforms was examined as a way of taking back some agency in counterintimacy world-building, a finding similar to Jenzen's (2017) discovery of agentic counterpublics. Participants also described direct affordances within social media platforms, in contrast to indirect attempts to train the algorithm, that provided some agency over their feeds to resist being pulled into a negative vortex.

9.8.1 Tagging

The most common curation affordances included tagging and muting:

> "i love mindlessly scrolling on tumblr, the tagging system is perfect for finding content on whatever im fixating on at the moment" -GreenGriffin, 21

Tagging is the act of labelling content with keywords that are then searchable as a feature of the platform, so that relevant content can be found or avoided by users. Tumblr has a robust tagging system and relatively weak algorithm, which may contribute to its being the focus of a range of queer and trans utopia work (Cavalcante, 2020; Haimson et al. 2021), due to the relative autonomy users have for worldmaking around communities or indeed "fixations". This is conducive to the kind of utopian vortextuality described by Cavalcante (2020) in that, through avoiding negative content, users do not get stuck updating by the impasse of anxiety, so can engage in a flurry of activity and then disengage.

9.8.2 Muting

Due to the complexity and subjective nature of the type of content participants wanted to avoid, it was not sufficient to neatly split social media accounts into a binary of blocked or fully present. The option to mute accounts and keywords, meaning that content will not be visible to the muter whilst leaving the poster of the content unaware of being muted, provides a middle-ground option:

> "I actually had to start muting/limiting my screen time this year due to constantly being switched on and being unable to relax because I'd be tied to negative news articles about my identity or negative social media presences from other people." – IndigoFrog, 22

Muting allows IndigoFrog to hold the nuance that some people may unintentionally have a "negative social media presence" that needs to be guarded against, without having to overtly exclude them as they would intentionally hostile actors (covered in next data chapter). Despite seeming individualistic in its customisation of a personal bubble, it is a pragmatic, non-confrontational approach to the inconvenience of other people's content when it is presented in an algorithmic deluge out of all end-users' control. This allows participation with trans counterintimacies to remain bearable. In this way self-caring feed curation can be conceived as a commoning practice as it is essential for long-term endurance:

> "I think its important to talk about curating feeds to what is good to see, and what makes you feel good, and to mute or unfollow accounts that make you feel bad about yourself." -BlueDog, 23

This self-care approach necessitates trans youth valuing themselves as members of the trans counterintimacy, rather than the trans counterintimacy being a cause that takes precedence over their own well-being.

9.8.3 Taking Breaks

When negative vortex-prone platforms could not be wrangled into providing affectively manageable feeds with affordances such as the above, participants described taking breaks from these platforms to care for their own well-being. This sounds simple but was described as a very challenging skill to learn:

> "I think logging off is so useful for when it's too much, and once you learn how to actually do that I think it's even better. It's a lot easier once you know nothing bad or terrible will happen if you take time for yourself" -IndigoFrog, 22

Devito (2022) examined a trans-specific sense of responsibility on social media to stay online to signpost "algorithmic traps and doors" to other trans people, a community responsibility to constant availability or "response-ability" (Lupinacci, 2021). This sense of obligation to other trans people can be seen throughout the data, and in addition to the stickiness of the anxious update, anxiety can also attach to the prospect of neglecting one's duty to stay online, to the extent that unlearning this dread is a skill that needs to be learnt.

Several participants explained that they use technology features such as time restriction settings on social media apps in an attempt to make themselves take breaks, but these are not always enough, "going cold turkey" to avoid the negative effects instead:

> "Something I started doing is setting a limit on how long I can use my phone each day (currently it's on 4 hours) which has really helped. I keep the widget(?) of the time on my home screen and it shows how long I've spent on each app." -PinkPig, 18
>
> "I find I don't have the self control to not extend timers haha" -RedHerring, 19
>
> "I try to disengage but I find if I don't delete the apps I end up back after a short while." -FlurescentBeetle, 18

This suggests that such technical interventions, whilst useful, are not enough on their own if users are still feeling the same affective orientation towards paranoid dogpaddling. As a result participants frequently spoke of the need to combine logging off with mindful distractions:

> “I do also make sure to take time away from technology all together, I'll mute my phone - except for calls from certain people like my parents - and I'll read a book or knit. A small recharge period.” -BlueBee, 23

Participants who expressed the least difficulty taking breaks from social media also described having physically proximal support networks to do other things with, without needing to be online to access them, e.g. housemates:

> “I'm not too bad at switching off & taking time for me. And a big one for me is chatting with people close to me -- I'm in a uni house & all the time I'm out the front having a ciggie break with one of my housemates & we've sat there for hours chatting before (I don't even smoke). By taking time just away from stuff I'm generally all good but I've got a nice support circle too should I ever need it.” -PurpleTurtle, 20

9.8.4 Loss in logging off

The price of taking a break from social media is not having access to information about events that are happening AFK, because social media is the primary source of AFK event promotion. Participants described how this results in having to choose to risk missing out on events if they need to take time away from the negative aspects of social media:

> “I can't get the info for exciting workshops and events offline, this seems to be the key way of publicising near me, I also wouldn't have met many people who i found exclusively through online communities. I think this is why I always find myself returning to spending too much time on it, I can't go cold turkey because I would miss out too much.”- RedHerring, 19

> “I put timers on all my social media apps, and only extend them if I absolutely need to (for example- I need to access a groupchat for an event I am attending). This way I can limit how much time I spend scrolling. I used to use reddit all the time, but now I only use it when I need to ask a question. This has led to me missing out on current events slightly, but I feel much better mentally. It is hard to disengage, and I've had to find distractions to replace being online.”- GreenShark, 19

There were also several participants who were only able to take breaks from social media by taking breaks from their jobs, as social media was integral to their professions (self-employed creatives):

> “I tend to take short breaks/hiatuses from my creative fields - including uploading upon and updating my social media - in order to allow myself time to rest, with spending time with friends for example being my key to such relaxation. I feel like I as a person have become so dependent on social media and its benefits that it is often difficult for me to take a step back, even when my mental health is negatively effected” -BlueDuck, 18

These issues mean that even if trans youth learn the skill of taking breaks from social media both behaviourally and affectively, they can still be pulled back into negative vortextuality by practicalities, as event info and career opportunities are on the same platform as negative trans content.

This chapter has now addressed all the features of what is formulated from here on as an intimacy undertow. Attachment to trans counterintimacy on social media can result in a combination of a sense of responsibility to other trans people, an anxious tendency towards paranoid reading and a fear of missing out on community events. Any of these affective hooks, coupled with algorithmic currents, can act as an intimacy undertow, pulling trans youth into doomscrolling in a negative trans content vortex, even if they are conscious of it as a behaviour they want to avoid.

Even for participants who expressed greater ease in resisting the intimacy undertow to take breaks, logging off did not stop them from knowing that anti-trans hostility was still happening online:

> "Definitely agree about the logging off thing. Like it's easy enough to log off but you still know what's happening, you still know what's being shared and that there are still people with awful views out there who try to hurt trans+ people via the internet." – BlueDog, 23

Indeed, given the experiences already explored, to forget the reality of negative trans content when AFK seems a challenging act of wilfully ignoring what is known.

To break out of anxiously dogpaddling in the impasse of the negative trans content vortex is, therefore, arguably not to become detached from the counterintimacy that snags the intimacy undertow, for there is no opting out when the issues in the vortex directly relate to your community, whether you scroll on them or not. Rather, it requires ceasing striving to stay updated, to refuse "responsibility and response-ability", to stop swimming, to sink, moving from a paranoid position to a depressive one. By taking time to be AFK, participants are carving out respite from the demands to constantly consume and produce more data about the injustice they face, refusing to allow the "cruelty as the point" to make its point, and letting what has already been said stand. Without the addition of nourishing AFK activities, this sinking can mean sitting with the knowledge of "what's happening", which may be more difficult to bear than the anxiety of constant updates.

It is also arguable that taking this respite plays a crucial role in maintaining the vortextuality of doomscrolling in the long term, Cavalcante (2020) describes cooling off periods of time AFK as a feature of rather than a departure from patterns of vortextuality, and whilst negative trans content has a negative impact on participants wellbeing, taking time away prevents their experience from reaching acute crisis (what Malatino (2022, p.105) would term a break), maintaining the affective experience, at worst, at a level of chronic impasse without tipping over into burn out.

This style of engagement with a trans affective commons speaks to Awkward-Rich's (2022) depressed trans position; a constant paranoid position of endlessly dogpaddling in negative trans content would be unliveable (from Westbrook's definition through to potentially literally), so breaks must be taken in the depressed position to find a mundane level of feeling bad in which the existence of bad trans news is still known about but at a distance that leaves space for factors that foster liveability.

Participants who managed to take breaks but did not permanently depart from the social media spaces that produce vortexes of negative trans content described returning to doomscrolling. This cycle, closer to traditional descriptions of vortextuality, is an example of Sedgwick's (1997) description of the way people move between paranoid and depressive positions rather than being fixed in one orientation. It could be argued that the affective seesawing between paranoid and depressive orientation to negative trans content is what provides the emotional energy for the negative trans content vortex to be maintained indefinitely at the macro-level of trans networks/filters. Due to the asynchronicity of individual use patterns there will always be some trans produsers in a paranoid (very engaged with negative content) position, whilst others are in a depressed (time off from negative content whilst still knowing it's going on) position.

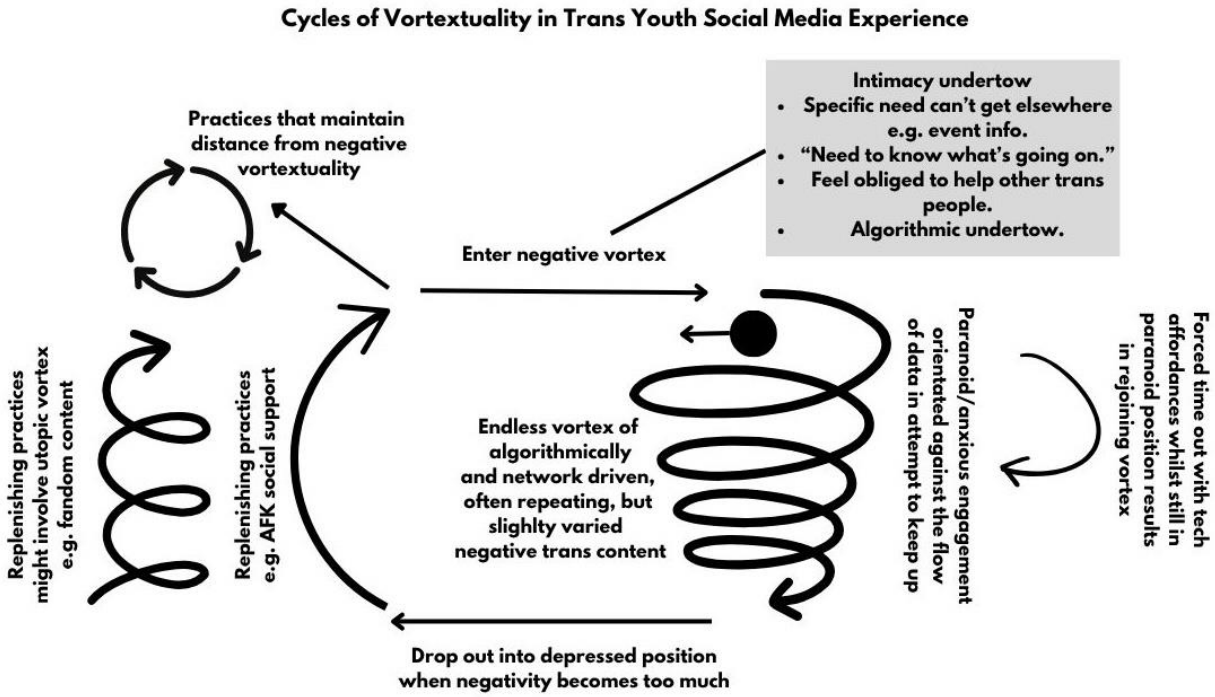


Figure 1. Cycles of Vortextuality in Trans Youth Social Media Experience

9.9 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how participants perceived algorithmic and human coproduction of vortexes of negative trans content on their social media feeds. Participants had varying beliefs about how much agency they had in changing these feeds to become less negative, with some feeling that algorithms presented negative content despite their wishes or best interests. Algorithmic and counterintimacy influences, synthesised as an Intimacy undertow, exert a pull on trans youth until they are doomscrolling on these vortexes.

Many participants found doomscrolling on these vortexes very temporally sticky despite being aware that it was having a negative effect on their well-being and making efforts to reduce social media use. Occupying a paranoid position, anxiously dogpaddling at the impasse of never-ending updates on crises, anxiety spreads with no landing place, as the most that can be done in this state is to keep moving to keep up. This is argued to be why participants found purely technological tactics to break free, such as time limits on apps, were not very effective alone if the user remained in the same affective orientation. To make a true break from the vortex requires sinking into a depressed trans

position that sits with the knowledge of bad trans news, transphobia and trans negative affect, whether it is witnessed or not. This frees up capacity for other forms of experience, such as restorative AFK relationships and hobbies, or even utopic vortextuality in the form of fandom engagement. Some participants were able to maintain their distance from negative vortextuality in this way, but others found themselves returning to doomscrolling the vortex due to factors of intimacy undertow.

10 Data Chapter 4: Transphobia

10.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has dealt with the vortexuality of the experience participants described in consuming (scrolling) social media, without necessarily being directly addressed or addressing anyone else. I will now move on to the more actively embattled aspects of participants experiences with transphobia and harassment on social media, often utilising Cross' orders of harassment (Cross, 2019) outlined in the literature review.

There are many different forms that online abuse can take (Thomas et al. 2021). The incidents described in this chapter range from opportunistic threats on voice channels to premeditated technologically-assisted harassment. The affective impact of this transphobia on participants is primarily divided into anger, fear and protectiveness, which is acted on with varying degrees of fight or flight behaviour. As in previous chapters, a commitment to t4t care as a part of a trans counterintimacy sees participants labouring online for the sake of others to whom they feel a responsibility, with varying costs to themselves.

10.2 Direct Hostility

Many participants described a few experiences of being directly targeted with transphobia or other hate comments[30] which then caused them to change how they engaged with social media to make themselves less visible:

> "The transphobic interactions I experienced mostly came from social media platforms with public voice chats e.g. discord (and also video games), which quickly escalated to instances of sexual harassment (most instances would be along the lines of 'show me your d*ck' or 'show me your *chest*', sometimes it would just be aggressive and repeated, other times it would be in association with r*pe threats). These experiences have lead me to hide my identity as much as possible online, as well as causing panic attacks and anxiety when I'm put in a position where I have to interact with people I don't know over the internet"- OrangeStingray, 17

[30] All participants who disclosed distressing experiences were signposted to appropriate support services and any safeguarding concerns were discussed with my supervisory team.

Online voice chats are associated with the culture of video games, even though platforms like Discord have expanded their user base far beyond gamers, and the kind of abuse OrangeStingray describes is common. Most online gamers have witnessed homophobic abuse and threats of physical and sexual violence (Kowert & Cook, 2022). The "ephemerality" of voice chats online also makes them almost impossible to moderate as there is no record of the abuse (Jiang et al. 2019).

Past research on online voice chat functions has found trans users reporting it to be a useful testing ground for their "passing voice", that is, whether people read their gender correctly from voice alone without also inferring their trans status (Freeman & Acena, 2022). However, OrangeStingray's experience is an example of the swift and violent response to not passing as a cis boy. Reasonably, this extreme exposure to abuse in the simultaneously intimate and anonymous form of an online voice channel led OrangeStingray to become very concerned with online privacy and security. We will see later in the chapter how widespread this chilling effect of transphobic abuse was on participants' experience of their ability to express themselves safely. It is worth noting that OrangeStingray was the youngest participant, whereas older participants were more likely to describe having tactics to deal with, or a level of desensitisation to, online abuse. This raises the implication that less experienced and/or younger trans people may be more vulnerable to directly experiencing and being deeply affected by online transphobia.

As shown in the vicarious transphobia section, OrangeStingray is affected by the intersection of racism and transphobia. Other participants experienced different intersections of hostility with their transness, including ableism and acephobia[31]:

> "I run an account primarily for aroace pride (I'm on various parts of those spectrums, as well as being non-binary) and on the whole it was a really positive experience and allowed me to anonymously interact with other queer people and enhance my understanding of the community and our history. Although also without fail on all my posts I would receive acephobic comments of people who were either ignorant or just loved to 'debate'. This is something I've only encountered once in real life compared to daily online. However, I think this was worth it for the network and other positive experiences I had." -GreenGriffin, 21

[31] Prejudice or hostility towards people on the asexual spectrum.

GreenGriffin here encapsulates the ambivalence representative of a lot of the data; the same affordances that facilitate building counterintimacies also facilitate hostile interactions, but the benefits outweigh the costs. The theme of hate being more prevalent online than AFK will be addressed later in the chapter.

10.3 Networked harassment

In addition to discrete incidents of transphobia, some participants described experiencing organised "pile-ons" of networked harassment from people who purposefully mobilise against trans people online. This is particularly difficult to avoid for those whose jobs as content creators require a public profile:

> **"**I have certainly received a lot of harassment an backlash from an older onlooking audience, almost always targeted towards my gender and pronouns - in one case, an incredibly famous, well-known comic attempted to ridicule me for my identity, including misgendering and sharing my tweets to his profile for his 'diehard fanbase' to support and continue the attacks which lasted many days - unprovoked."- BlueDuck, 18

Here, BlueDuck describes a case of a highly networked account belonging to someone with far more social capital taking part in third-order harassment, which caused a deluge of second-order harassment. This is a drawback of the affordance of social media that democratises access between people of asymmetrical social status. In addition to making it possible for anyone on a platform to "@" public figures[32] on that platform, public figures can use functions such as the "quote tweet" to take people with much smaller networks out of their curated contexts and present them with a framing of their choice, in this case, as a target deserving of ridicule.

In addition to the risk of catching the attention of one highly connected hostile account, some design features of social media can be set to deliver trans targets to hostile actors who wish to use them for harassment:

> **"**The issue with publically posting blatantly queer and specifically trans work online is there's groups of people who literally have alerts on certain hashtags or actively seek them out to spam or copy and paste the same hatespeach. My partner and i get it a lot if we post any art that directly mentions transness or are anti transphobia/trans violence."-BlueCrab, 21

[32] A public figure on social media is defined here as anyone with at least 10,000 followers on a single platform (LoMonte & Leibert, 2023).

This is a visibility trap that appears to be unavoidable in the current iteration of social media platforms, if a group of trans-hostile actors are proactive enough to research and use the same technologies of tagging and identification that trans people use to find each other's content, (hashtags, key words etc.), trans users have to choose to expose themselves to the risk of being found by those most dedicated to harassing them in order to reach trans people not already in their network (Scheuerman et al. 2018). Due to the centralisation of social media, the potential scale of networked harassment is huge, when the target audience for the original content may be as small as just other trans people not already in the poster's network, that is, imagined counterintimacy members.

10.4 Instant embattlement

We have seen the ambivalent but vital potential of social media for trans identity work in Data Chapter 1. Another consequence of this is the experience several participants described of being immediately exposed to trans antagonism and emersed in negative trans news upon emerging into a trans identity on social media:

> "Using social media both benefited and halted me in terms of coming out as trans - it allowed me to learn so much about myself and my identity, though also introduced me to so much hate which I didn't even previously know had existed. In a sense, it 'opened up a can of worms' as, when I started expressing myself online, I also received a lot of hate as a result." -BlueDuck, 18

> **"**When thinking about trans youth on social media I think people need to be prepared for them to become almost radicalised. When you're young and learning about yourself you seek these spaces out and you're suddenly faced with so much hate. For me personally it caused issues for my family because I was very suddenly challenging all of their beliefs, I was suddenly very vocal about trans rights and would not take anything against it. While, generally, this is a positive thing, we should be fighting for change, it was a very rapid development and I was very defensive of my beliefs. It caused arguments because I wouldn't challenge their beliefs in a way that was accessible, I was angry and hurt by what I had seen and I brought that into real life with me. It wasn't a slow introduction, I was immediately in the deep end of fighting transphobia and there was no scale." -BlueBee, 23

As made clear in the quote above, there is no distinction made between online and "real life" with this anger and distress, which, in this case, resulted in alienation in the AFK environment, where the context for BlueBee's sudden distress was not understood. What BlueBee describes here is an alternative narrative to the debunked "Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria" (Ashely, 2020), instead describing what is formulated here as a Rapid

Onset Trans Rage (ROTR). ROTR comes *after* trans youth realise they are trans, attempt to do agentic learning around identity work online, and are suddenly exposed to a deluge of vicarious and direct transphobia that now produces intergroup emotions due to counterintimacy attachment. The hurt of ROTR could risk becoming a feature of a wounded subjecthood, such as described by Westbrook (2020), if trans youths' experiences of transness are invariably hounded by animosity. This anger is described by BlueBee as galvanising them into activism, however misguided they now believe the initial form that took was, in line with Malatino's (2022) model of trans negativity inspiring a t4t praxis of care.

ROTR is an affective state that participants situated in early trans identity development and reported changing over time as they gained experience and saw the variety in how other trans people responded to transphobia and the result. There is a mismatch here between the abruptness of exposure to trans antagonism and the gradual lessons of experience over time. This means that many participants' descriptions of being acutely distressed by incidents of exposure to transphobia on social media are from early in their trans identity work, when they had yet to develop tactics and coping strategies.

10.5 Chilling Speech and driving out of public life online

Data Chapter 2 went into depth on issues of visibility and outness with regards to traps and doors, which touched on risk but primarily focused on models for liveable lives. Here, visibility will be broached exclusively in the context of transphobic harassment.

In interviewing trans adults in the US about their technology use, Lerner et al. (2020) found attitudes to privacy and self-censorship online related to the nature of the risk model for harassment victimisation the participant subscribed to: visibility, luck or identity. Much like Devito's (2022) actionable versus demotivational folk theories of algorithms discussed earlier, Lerner et al. attest that the level of self-efficacy inherent to models of risk may influence how that risk is responded to, but in the opposite way. They argue that trans people who subscribe to risk of harassment being out of their control due to luck and/or their trans status may feel there is no point in trying to defend against it; whereas those who subscribe to a model that involves more agency, such as their level of online visibility, whilst it may increase risk of self-blame, it may also encourage self-censorship or logging-off altogether so as not to "attract attention".

In this project, most participants appeared to subscribe to a visibility model of risk to various degrees; many described a fear of being directly targeted with transphobia, leading to self-censorship:

> **“**I'm a bit more reserved on twitter, not replying to certain posts that I would like because I can see them being targeted by hate and don't want to make myself a target too.”-BlueBee, 23

Here we can see the potential for self-blame in BlueBee not wanting to “make myself a target” by expressing themselves on a public platform, implying that silence is a strategy of self-defence that takes precedence over the advantages of being visible.

Participants talked of witnessing transphobic harassment online that targeted individuals and their personal details, to the extent that it was not uncommon for participants to describe seeking to remove any identifiable presence from social media, to reduce their risk of experiencing the same:

> **“**online safety is such a big issue for the trans community! we are just so small, and it can be so easy to identify us. it's especially annoying, I think, when u take into consideration that social media is also so necessary for forging connections in our community? I work with some grassroots trans orgs, and I’d love to be more public about my involvement on social media, but I still feel so unsafe. I don't let people post my face on social media anymore, and I’ll soon be trying to remove my face entirely, bc I just hate having that intimate digital footprint!” - OrangeZebra, 20

Findings such as this contrast with research into the privacy concerns of the general population regarding social media, in which most participants report knowledge of privacy issues with social media use but find social media too enjoyable to act on any privacy concerns they may have (Church et al., 2017). Whereas trans people have been found to take part in cost-benefit analysis for any disclosures they make online (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018).

There were also examples of algorithms increasing the harms that participants faced online in such a way that could only be mitigated by retreat from public. Whilst the previous data chapter examined how algorithms were felt to influence the content participants were presented with, algorithms also impacted trans youth as producers of content. Participants were aware that platform algorithms could push the content they post online in front of the eyes of an unintended and hostile audience, leading to harassment:

> "try to remain as anonymous as possible on social media, mostly to avoid trolls. for example, I don't bother commenting on reddit posts that have a lot of replies already, as there is a much higher chance that the algorithm picks that post up and displays it on the front page, meaning more people outside of the subreddit see it, and therefore more trolls." – GreenShark, 19

The term *context collapse* may technically apply to what GreenShark describes, but *collapse* implies a neutrality that belies the active harm being caused by an algorithm promoting content out of its intended context, without the consent of the poster. Earlier in this chapter, BlueDuck describes a human actor taking part in third-order harassment by taking trans content out of its intended context and presenting it as a target to a wider audience; the same is being done here by an algorithm, the context is mechanically demolished rather than merely collapsing. The algorithm may be incapable of the same malicious intent as the human actor, but the indifference to harm in its design amounts to the same. This potential to be picked up by an uncaring algorithm and thrust in front of a hostile audience when posting publicly represents an example of what DeVito (2022) describes as an algorithmic visibility trap and, in this case, demonstrates the silencing effect that knowledge of this algorithmic risk can have on participants.

Even defensive strategies against human and machine, such as avoiding any public profile online, is not defence against networked harassment:

> **"**I monitor fascist networks and channels online so I regularly see random trans people just living their life and being put on blast for it - or even just ppl in the street that the right think are queer+"-PinkPig, 18

This once again demonstrates the entangled nature of online and offline and brings into question the extent to which one can truly log off. Even if trans people do not have a consensual online presence, data about them collected and/or used in online contexts against their will or without their knowledge may put them at risk AFK.

It could be expected, following Lerner et al. (2020), that witnessing this lack of self-efficacy in being targeted by harassment may result in losing motivation to attempt to defend against it, concluding that if there is nothing that can be done to mitigate the risk of privacy violations one might as well be as open as suits the potential benefits of social media. However, this attitude was not present in the data; no participants expressed a complete lack of defensive strategies, and many of those who described a low self-

efficacy model of risk still described a high level of concern in attempting to avoid it, for example PinkPig again:

> **"**I'm beginning to realise how careful you have to be online as a Q+ person with your face attached to your social media account but that seems to have escalated to the point where I don't even want to be active on there."-PinkPig, 18

It may be that due to the overtly privacy-conscious method of data collection, those who do not see value in defensive action were less likely to take part, as the privacy protocol could then have been viewed as demotivating extra labour. This may be why this attitude is not represented in the data, but this would be speculation. Instead, what was found was very low self-efficacy commonly appeared with disengagement with social media, much more in line, rather than contrasting with, Devito's (2022) algorithmic folk theories.

Despite this, most of the participants expressed a nuanced approach that mixed models of risk and strategies of defence against harassment, of which self-censorship and minimising visibility were part of a range of context-dependent tactics. This could be argued to be another example of Awkward-Rich's (2022) depressed trans position: one that accepts transphobic harassment is a "mundane fact" of being online (low self-efficacy) but knows existing online as a trans person must be possible despite this because so many do (adequate self-efficacy).

10.6 Platform affordances for harm reduction

To facilitate adjusting to transphobia as a mundane fact of using social media in a way that is bearable, many participants described ways in which they used the affordances of each platform to curate their social media environments in ways that minimised their exposure to direct hostility and vicarious transphobia, whilst also preserving some public life:

> **"**I'm quite good at blocking now because I simply don't have the energy. When I was 14-17 I would engage in the debates and get wound up and upset about what was being said, but having learned from that I know when it's best to just block and move on to protect myself."-BlueBee, 23

> **"**The block and mute buttons do wonders for wellbeing on the internet. I've blocked words like transmed[33] and accounts I see posting anti trans rhetoric, which means I can protect myself from this. I feel absolute despair when seeing

[33] See Intracommunity Conflict

> anti-trans things, especially when it comes from transmeds who should understand, or anti trans people who are sharing views that are just wrong but when you know that educating them wont work. I never engage with any of this because I know it wont change their minds, but it can make me feel frustrated and helpless so I try to avoid it."-BlueDog, 23

Rather than an opaque "queer utopia" bubble that completely insulates them from different opinions, what participants describe here is the vigilant maintenance of doors to their personal online environment. In developing a model of algorithmic doors and traps Devito (2022) was building on existing work about the opportunities and pitfalls of trans visibility in general, both online and AFK (Gossett et al. 2017).

The participants above describe an earlier time when they had more of an open-door policy and would attempt to "debate" and "educate" people expressing anti-trans sentiments but invariably found this to be distressing and energy-draining without making the desired impact. Through these experiences, they have learned to recognise and close the door on anti-trans accounts through the use of the block feature. Much like participants' attempts to curate their feeds to minimise negative trans content, they had to be exposed to it in the first instance to know to avoid it.

As with algorithms, due to the ever-changing safety and security affordances of large social media platforms, participants were very aware that their ability to curate their social media experience was dependent on the whims of a handful of tech bosses who did not seem to understand or care about their needs as produsers:

> "I'd love for the pathetic little man child elon musk to not take away the block button. I don't understand how that's a good idea at all" - BlueDog, 23

In the time since data collection X (formerly Twitter) has altered its features so that, whilst there is still a block button, it does not prevent the blocked account from viewing posts from the account that blocked them; leading to concerns that this greatly lessens its effectiveness at interrupting harassment (Cuthbertson, 2024). Data Chapter 5 will examine the tendency for social media platforms to provide worse user satisfaction over time in more detail; the focus here is that participants were aware they could not trust the management of social media platforms to prioritise their well-being. This risk is mediated by "multitool appage", as discussed in Data Chapter 1, as this reduces the reliance on any single platform. However, with multiple platforms increasingly centralised by parent companies that roll out the same updates across all their

properties, this may become vanishingly useful. For example, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and Threads are all run by Meta, who updated their definition of “hateful conduct” in January 2025 to allow users to make misogynistic and LGBT+-phobic posts (Booth, 2025).

One of the few technology options for curating social media experience that can be applied across multiple platforms is the community-developed and maintained project Shinigami Eyes:

> “i make use of 'shinigami eyes' (a browser extension that marks a person green if they're pro-trans and red if they're anti-trans) just to keep tabs on who i may be interacting with.” -OrangeZebra, 20

That Shinigami Eyes functions across all major platforms is rare for lists such as this (which, where they exist, are usually platform-specific), and has led to a great deal of controversy as to whether it should be considered an impingement on the privacy and free speech of those added to the lists without their consent. However, without community-sourced lists such as these, “each individual is left to keep track of whom to trust and not which, needless to say, is a tall order” (Sætra & Ese, 2023, p.59). As such, Shinigami eyes could be said to act as a t4t commoning technology, as a non-profit, grassroots practice to reduce labour for the wider counterintimacy of trans people online. As with other t4t practices, this is not to say it is unproblematic, but it is at least better than before (Peters, 2016).

List maintenance is just one example of curation practices for the well-being of the wider trans counterintimacy rather than the individual. Participants, particularly those who maintained a professional platform associated with transness, felt that using platform tools to moderate replies to their content was an added labour they had to take on for the sake of their audience:

> “My partner and i get it [hate comments] a lot if we post any art that directly mentions transness or are anti transphobia/trans violence. (for context we are both artists) It doesn't bother us too much but we now have a responsibility to moderate the comment section and accounts in case someone more vulnerable than us come across the post as a baby trans or a cis person and are unexpectedly subjected to violence online as a direct action of something we've made.” -BlueCrab, 21

The use of the term “baby trans” by BlueCrab does not necessarily relate to younger trans people but does refer to trans people they are elder to in experience. It may appear

to be a contradiction to describe someone as simultaneously a trans youth and a trans elder, but this is one of the consequences of non-linear trans time (Pearce, 2018). Physical age and "trans age" can differ in that a trans person who transitioned many years ago is older in "trans years" than someone physically older who has only recently transitioned (Kirk, 2022). Little research has been done into what constitutes a "trans elder" but following Pearce (2018) and Kirk (2022) I formulate it here as a relational position in which a trans person of greater trans experience is in a position to use that experience to aid others of lesser experience or greater vulnerability.

As newly realised/developing trans people emerge every day, and trans people can vary vastly in experiences, almost all trans people are in a position to "elder" others. On social media, rather than take specific, less experienced or resilient trans people under their wing (although they may be doing this as well), being a member of trans counterintimacies means there are ever-present *imagined* younger/more vulnerable trans people to elder for. This imagined baby trans as a feature of a trans counterintimacy can be seen in much of the already explored data relating to feelings of obligation and responsibility. Further exploration of eldering as an aspect of t4t commitment to the trans counterintimacy follows in an analysis of counter-speech as a response to transphobia.

10.7 Counter-speech and victim support

Participants who did not describe a strategy of closing the door on anti-trans sentiment through blocking etc, cited a sense of responsibility to the community to explain their continued efforts to either educate or "fight" those expressing anti-trans sentiments, even when this results in being worn down in the same way described by participants who have decided it is not a useful activity:

> **"**I feel like when I'm interacting with people online, even though it may take an emotional tole, I don't feel able to disengage with people who are spreading hate because it scares me that I know other people would have also experienced hatred from those people, and I want to be able to minimise that effect if at all possible either through educating them or other means." -OrangeStingray, 17

Counter-speech aims to "influence those who write hate speech, to encourage them to rethink their message, and to offer to all who read hate speech a critical deconstruction of it" (Baider, 2023, p.249). There is significant literature on counter-speech to online

hate speech and what forms may be effective in response to different types of hate. If the intent is to change the behaviour of the person posting hate, affect is important. Counter-speech in online comments is most often found to be hostile in tone, whilst a positive affective tone is most likely to result in a positive outcome (Baider, 2023; Ping et al., 2024). This places a great deal of pressure on victims to perform the asymmetrical labour of responding to hate with positivity with no guarantee of results. Additionally, as addressed in the review of the literature, "friendly harassment" (Claeys, 2024) can be difficult to identify, and it may take some experience before a user learns to differentiate between who is worth engaging in an educational effort and who is acting in bad-faith.

In the previous chapter, BlackCat described a compulsion to try to educate people who make transphobic posts, similar to OrangeStingray. The link between counter-speech and vortextuality being that the algorithmic undertow (Alderman, 2024) will always deliver new transphobic people to educate, many of whom will refuse to be educated. As there is no end to the data provided and no end to the data required to "show the world that trans people are not horrible or unnatural" (as no amount of data leads to these accusations ceasing), data saturation is not possible.

In her analysis of the inequalities and injustices in algorithm usage, Benjamin (1029) points out the stifling result of the pressure to endlessly collect data on your own oppression:

> "Demanding more data on subjects that we already know much about is, in my estimation, a perversion of knowledge. The datafication of injustice … in which the hunt for more and more data is a barrier to acting on what we already know. We need something like an academic equivalent of "I said what I said!"" (Benjamin, 2019, p.93)

Trans people are asked to produce evidence over and over again and are ignored when they do (e.g. the Cass Report discarded the majority of studies that have been done on puberty blockers only to recommend that more studies be done (Horton, 2024)). This may be why the appreciation of trans influencers who produce videos of trans-affirming arguments was so evident in Data Chapter 2; not only does it help trans youth build a curriculum for themselves, they serve as accessible, bookmarkable resources to reduce the labour of educating others.

If the intent of counter-speech is to support the victim more than to change the opinion of the person posting hate comments, counter-speech that comes from the majority group is shown to be helpful for reducing identity threat and separatist intentions in the

targeted group (Van Houtven et al. 2024). Research looking at the likelihood of young people to respond with counter-speech to online hate found that the higher the perceived personal responsibility, the more likely young people were to intervene (Obermaier, 2024). It has also been found that for stigmatised groups, perceived identity threat increases the sense of personal responsibility to intervene with counter-speech (Obermaier et al. 2023). So, whilst counter-speech from members of the wider public may reduce the feeling amongst trans youth that trans people are under threat and should retreat to their own space, it may be more likely that other members of the trans counterintimacy will feel a personal responsibility to intervene.

This sense of responsibility to other trans people has already been seen in the data via participants feeling a duty to stay engaged, consuming negative trans content, and this was also present in a duty to engage in counter-speech:

> **"**I also feel a responsibility I think because I'm more capable of dealing with transphobia online then I was a few years ago and how much trans community support has helped me I want to contribute. Fighting bigots isn't always the best use of your time but if its to defend a trans person ill do it without hesitation when I'm able."-BlueCrab, 21

In Malatino's (2022) examination of cultivating numbness to survive trans-antagonistic environments, he not only formulated this as a form of self-defence but also to increase capacity for caring for other trans people. This can be a laborious skill to develop as it is difficult, "when and if one is a trans elder (which has nothing, necessarily, to do with age)," to keep thoughts of the necropolitical violence and trauma affecting trans loved ones "from flooding one's consciousness in such moments" of giving aid (Malatino, 2022, p.75). For example, BlueCrab's extra "few years" of experience from when they were less able to cope with online transphobia evokes a feeling of responsibility to contribute their hard-earned numbness to care for other trans people.

The distinction between OrangeStingray and BlueCrab's accounts of feeling a responsibility to trans counterintimacies to take part in counter-speech against transphobia is the emotional cost. OrangeStingray feels the same commitment to t4t care but is unable to numb himself to the emotional toll. Malatino's analysis of trans numbness in the service of other trans people places numbness as the mitigator to the painful empathy of recognition and identification with the trans subject(s) they are trying to help, to avoid "self-shattering" (p.70). Both participants are attempting t4t

commoning practices in the counter-speech they describe, but only BlueCrab has developed the numbness which reduces the cost of intervening to potentially not making the "best use of time", whereas OrangeStingray finds this work distressing, although nonetheless compulsive. This is not to say that numbness is not in itself a cost, or that numbness is inherent to eldering. Numbness is a technology of survival in a trans-hostile environment that makes it useful for eldering, but in a hypothetical transphobia-free environment, numbness would be unnecessary.

In discussing the ways in which t4t principles often "short-circuit" when applied to life, Marvin (2022) argues that in addition to the common paternalism displayed by cis people towards trans people, trans people can also be paternalistic in the assumptions they make about what other trans people may need by over-asserting similarity due to shared group membership. It is also arguable from the data here that the imagined younger/more vulnerable trans person online risks evoking a paternalism that can harm the bestower of t4t care, as the imagined figure imposes a felt sense of duty to stay in situations that range from wasteful to actively distressing based on assumptions about their needs from projecting their past experiences onto the current trans counterintimacy. These assumptions may be largely correct, there may well be trans people who see their counter-speech and find it helpful, as many participants suggest, but when this comes at the cost of their own well-being, they are assessing the suffering of others as more worthy of care than their own, as if they were not also a part of the imagined trans counterintimacy they are concerned for.

It is also necessary to think beyond t4t to wider solidarities in counterintimacies and practices of care. As we saw in the quote from OrangeStingray in the previous chapter, intersectional hatred was perceived as compounding the absence of counter-speech. There was a stark lack of counter-speech and support when racialised trans content creators faced hate compared to creators with just one of those characteristics. Therefore there must be a commitment to intersectional solidarity in counter-speech if it is to be regarded as a true t4t commoning practice, as trans people exist across all demographics, and the underlying ideology of differently-targeted hate speech often overlaps (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007).

The quotes regarding counter-speech relate to tackling the harasser in response to witnessing harassment, even in cases where the intended result is oriented towards the victim, which often results in fatigue and frustration. Other participants described alternative responses to transphobia online focused on improving the experience that other trans people were having, varying from informal habits such as posting encouraging replies to young/early transition trans people to "keep going", to more formalised activities such as volunteering as an LGBT+ forum moderator:

> "it also means that I'm always trying to demonstrate support for people. For example when people are posting about their transition or need advice from someone older than them I feel like I should comment some encouragement to keep going. Especially when I'm on tiktok and seeing stuff about everything happening in America at the moment, these people are scared for their lives, I think showing them any level of support is important." GreenGriffin, 21

Research on UK youth bystander responses to online harassment has found that young people prefer to perform "micro-interventions" that support the victim e.g. liking their posts, rather than engaging in counter-speech (Davidovic et al. 2023). In the context of t4t care, this is a tactic that does not require numbness to the same extent, and so may be more sustainable for trans youth who find counter-speech emotionally wearing.

The effectiveness of victim support as a low-risk alternative to counter-speech is further evidenced by participants describing seeking out places on social media where they knew they could access affirming content following exposure to transphobia, whether that was interaction with peers, or posts by trans content creators they admired:

> **"**When I got a comment that really upset me on reddit, I put a message out explaining what had happened onto a different subreddit and got lots of support and validation in my feelings and identity, but I havent used this since."-BlueDog, 23

This shows the agentic capacity of trans youth to seek out the support they need even when distressed, although knowing where to seek support may take some experience. The importance of trans-influencer content in facilitating participants building a curriculum of trans-supportive content was explored in Data Chapter 2.

10.8 Hate worse online but can bleed into AFK life

Most participants expressed that they come across much more hate online than AFK. Some took this as evidence that things are not as bad as they seem, although this is contingent on not holding online to be "real" in the same way as AFK:

> **"**I would say I see much more hate online than offline- I've found people to be much more accepting than I expected after seeing all the horror stories online. I think social media often warps our perspective, of course there are horrible people in the world that absolutely would say things in person, but even so they haven't been as malicious as I expected."-GreenShark, 19

GreenShark describes the inclination to take a paranoid reading into AFK environments after being exposed to a lot of vicarious transphobia. However, because his positive, or at least neutral, AFK experiences have countered what van Houtven et al. (2024) describe as the tendency to homogenise the out-group into a threat to be avoided as a whole, he has been able to devalue online hate as unrepresentative.

For others, there was a lack of distinction between online and AFK, as the people posting hate online also exist AFK, contributing to a feeling of dread about being visibly trans in public:

> **"**I wish other people knew how terrifying it is to be publicly trans+ on the internet, and that the slightest slip might cause a pile on for no reason. Also that it feeds into real life, like sometimes I'll be working in a cafe and have something visibly trans on my laptop and get worried that other people will see and yell at me."-BlueDog, 23

Understanding the need to separate online and AFK if he was to minimise this anxiety, PinkPig actively encouraged differentiation by reminding himself that not everyone is "too online" (Johnson, 2021):

> "I try really hard not to let the things I see on social media impact me, I try to put it into perspective offline by explaining it to someone who hasn't had the context and it makes it seem a lot less important which helps :)" -PinkPig, 18

Contrary to long-expressed concerns that social media filter bubbles result in echo chambers that prevent users from being exposed to views different from their own, unlike AFK life (Sunstein, 2018; Pariser, 2011), participants found AFK life contains much fewer incidents of direct hostility. This finding does, however, imply that social media minimises exposure to the moderate and/or indifferent attitudes that are found to be more representative of people in AFK life. The logic of this is that people are less likely

to post about or engage with things they don't particularly care about, meaning social media content presents an exaggerated polarisation on topics. So, whilst there are research findings into utopic trans and queer "bubbles" online that act as a safe space away from environments full of danger and hate (Jaaksi, 2025, Cavalcante, 2020), including in Data Chapter 1's exploration of walled gardens as emotional support spaces, these bubbles are often spoken about in conjunction with the knowledge and experience of hate *elsewhere online*, as well as in some cases AFK. Without knowledge of which, trans users would not need to create safe digital "homesteads'" (Jaaksi, 2025).

The polarised nature of social media content is likely only part of participants' heightened expectation of threat; Westbrook (2020) describes the foundational focus in trans activism around fatal violence as having the unintended consequence of giving trans people the feeling that their lives are "unliveable" by creating an exaggerated sense of threat without space for joy. Cross (2024) argues that this is especially the case for trans people on social media where, if they don't spend enough time in their AFK community (whether out of fear or lack of opportunity), the stream of trans hostility and bad news can make a liveable life seem out of reach.

Even with plenty of time spent AFK, it can feel like it is only a matter of time until one of the many purveyors of online hate is encountered AFK. One way in which PurpleTurtle was able to make this situation liveable was by accepting the likely AFK presence of transphobic strangers so long as they are unlikely to address her directly:

> "People tend to be able to say whatever they want online that most wouldn't in person & for some people that makes them go wild. But the other side of the same coin is that because people say what they wouldn't in person (including me) it makes talking & being open so much easier. Like I'm so bad at holding a conversation in person but online I'm able to, I'm able to be a bit more wacky & honest with people & hype them up more than I would in person, & same back to me. Idk it might just be the people I keep around me, but social media's fairly positive for me" -PurpleTurtle, 20

Amongst all the doomscrolling, vortextuality and targeted harassment, it is tempting to reduce social media to its negative impacts on participants. Rather, the data shows a deep ambivalence to most of the affordances of social media, expressed directly here with the two sides of the same coin metaphor. PurpleTurtle is more likely to see people comfortable expressing transphobia online than AFK, but she sees the same remove of media mediation that emboldens hate speech as what allows her to positively express

herself and build supportive and authentic intimacies. This suggests that rather than simply contributing to an unlivable life, the same degree of remove that is felt to embolden transphobic hate also allows for the carving out of trans joy by those who struggle with AFK social interaction. Cross (2024) agrees that social media can contribute to both unliveable and liveable lives for trans people depending on how it is used and what is expected of it; “It’s powerful. Powerful enough to save your life. But is it politics? It may be a precondition of politics- you can’t politick if you’re not alive- but it’s not the thing itself”(Cross, 2024, p174).

10.9 Conclusion

Most participants spoke of transphobia as ubiquitous and difficult to escape on social media. This had the emotional impact of anger, anxiety and fear, with some participants learning how to either numb themselves to the hostility or devalue those who expressed it.

Reports of extreme direct transphobia were mostly from the youngest and/or those who had to maintain a public profile, as more experienced participants, who had the opportunity to, described a range of tactics for minimising their exposure to transphobia and hostile actors’ access to them. The desire to avoid being the target of transphobia was seen to have a chilling effect on speech, as many participants described retreating entirely from public online life, particularly in any identifiable way.

For those who maintained public profiles, technological affordances for boundary maintenance were used to minimise opportunities for direct transphobia, but trust in the management of social media platforms’ commitment to user safety was low. Instead, there was a widely expressed commitment to t4t care through education, argument and emotional support. This obligation to the trans counterintimacy often came from an imagined position as an elder to the trans people in need, and it is arguable that this paternalism may become a barrier to self-care.

Some participants described seeking out emotional support from known friendly spaces when distressed by transphobia on social media. This ease of access to supportive trans spaces, plus freedom from the self-consciousness of AFK presentation, is a reminder of

the profound benefits of social media that make its use deeply ambivalent for trans youth, despite being exposed to so much more transphobia online than AFK.

11 Auto-netnography

"*Trans scholars are likely either to be suicidal or to have suicidal friends*. This is the context in which we conduct our studies." Pearce (2020)

11.1 End of March 2024

In February 2024, after I had collected and analysed my data and had begun writing up, a good friend of mine died by suicide. He was trans, a teacher, and an early career academic. We had a lot in common and faced a lot of the same issues- there but for the…etc. I took a 2-month break in study to focus on caring for myself and my community through this bereavement and suddenly found myself facing the hardest edge of some of the questions I asked my participants: Are you able to log off when things get too much? At these times are you able to get what you need offline?

A few days after my friend died, my social media feeds filled with news of the death of Nex Benedict, a trans 16-year-old in Oklahoma, who was severely beaten by 3 of his[34] classmates in a school bathroom, he died the next day. No one at the school intervened or called an ambulance afterwards, despite Nex being unable to walk. Instead, he was suspended. His family and friends report he had faced a great deal of bullying at school due to being trans. Chaya Raichik had recently been appointed to the Oklahoma library advisory board, despite, or perhaps due to, having harassed an LGBT+-friendly teacher out of their job at Nex's school the year before. Most of my social media network are posting about Nex, I don't have any words, what is there to say? When Brianna Ghey was killed, I was so overcome with anger that I couldn't sleep for weeks, in the wake of my friend's death, Nex feels like springing a leak in an already-sinking boat and being surprised that a further level of hopelessness is possible.

A few days after that my timeline was awash with the burning image of Aaron Bushnell, a 25-year-old in the US Air Force, who self-immolated outside of the Israeli embassy in

[34] whilst reported by his family as being non-binary, Nex's friends reported that he told them he was trans masculine and preferred and used he/him pronouns, but thought this would be more difficult for his family to accept than they/them.

Washington[35]. I saw accounts from trans women who reported knowing Bushnell from online anarchist spaces, where Bushnell had been trialling the name Lily with hopes of transitioning one day. They speculated that Bushnell had decided to die without making this widely known because Bushnell knew that the same action made by a trans woman would be more easily dismissed than that of an ostensibly cis man. I find this very credible and feel a new sort of pain at the clarity of sense every decision Bushnell made makes to me.

A few days after that, I saw posts about Righteous Torrence Hill, a 35-year-old Black trans man who ran an LGBT+ salon in Atlanta, being shot dead. Other trans people I hear about the murders of via social media in this time, most of them Black or Indigenous, include, but are not limited to: Shandon Floyd, 20, Bernardo Pantaleon, 30, Marilyn Augustine, 51, and LaKendra Andrews, 26. I read the details of their deaths and as much detail as there is about their lives with the same grim helplessness as usual, as usual because such global news is almost daily. I feel guilt that my transness is so much less risky than theirs due to my whiteness, I feel guilt that I struggle with wanting to be alive when every one of their eulogies describes them as loving life.

A few days after that Liz Truss proposed a bill that would make it illegal to support the medical or social transition of anyone under the age of 18. This comes on the final day of the government's public consultation on its draft guidance for gender-questioning children in schools, guidance so hostile to trans youth that it must be non-statutory due to conflicts with the Equality Act that would leave schools who follow it at risk of being sued by supportive parents. I have not responded to the public consultation. I have been responding to public consultations on trans issues for 5 years, and in every case, the government has disregarded the majority trans-positive responses. At this point, I suspect they are purposeful tools to create fatigue. Despite this, I have felt guilt every day seeing activists make posts begging people to respond to the consultation, then I see Truss's bill and take no pleasure in feeling justified in thinking that it would have been a waste of time.

[35] At the time of writing Gaza has been under bombardment for 6 months. I can't remember the last time I had a day where I didn't see an image of a dead Palestinian on my phone, most often a child.

The same day, my news app alerts me that 2 more arrests have been made in the case of an 18-year-old trans girl who was stabbed 13 times at a Harrow roller rink in February (the day after the first anniversary of Brianna's murder), those arrested are also teenagers. I click on the story because the headline isn't clear and, for a moment, I think it is news of a new transphobic attack rather than a development in an existing case. Thus, presumably feeding data to the news app algorithm that decides what stories to push to me.

The next day the NHS confirmed it would no longer prescribe puberty blockers to trans youth outside of "mandatory research trials", this decision goes against all clinical evidence and best medical practice. Puberty blockers will still be prescribed to cis youth with precocious puberty, without the need for research participation. I first see this on my news app but it is soon the subject of most of my social media feeds. Posts by prominent trans accounts encourage me to sign petitions and email my MP, I do neither of these things, see above.

The day after that, JK Rowling posts on X (formerly Twitter) claiming that the Nazis' 1933 looting of the Berlin Institute of Sexology and the burning of Hirschfeld's trans research was a "fever dream" that did not happen[36]. I see this despite having stopped using X (formerly Twitter) over a year ago (due to the intolerable level of hatred on the site) because some of the trans people I follow on Bluesky have shared a screenshot of her tweet there.

On the day of my friend's funeral, I open Bluesky to see Nex's death has been ruled a suicide, most of the people I follow don't believe this, those who are willing to believe it post a phrase I've often seen on placards at trans pride: "Every trans suicide is a murder". I think about who murdered my friend: the GIC with the 20yr waiting list, forcing him to DIY? The employers who harassed him for organising for workplace safety? The fertility clinic that told him, against current medical evidence, that he would have to detransition for at least 2 years before he could even freeze his eggs? The government that set

[36] This kind of holocaust denial is not uncommon online, but it used to be rare that someone high profile would espouse it, previously Labour MP Rosie Duffield was the most notable person to retweet this form of denial without consequence.

statutory sick pay so low it doesn't even cover an average rent payment? The society so ableist and transphobic that everything he was facing wasn't remarkable enough in his community to raise significant alarm bells?

In all of this I don't log off, in my grief my concentration is shot and my energy is low, making scrolling on social media one of the few things I feel able to do. I don't post very much, every few days I will post a screenshot of a poem, as poems are the other thing I find myself able to read in this state, but I stop my usual flurry of reposts of political, mostly trans-related, news and analysis.

As time goes on and I start to feel like I *should* be functioning again my anxiety begins to build, especially when I see other trans people, some my age but mostly younger (sometimes much younger), posting about their impressive academic and artistic achievements, the huge scale of their activist work, the kinds of things I *should* feel more galvanised than ever to do. I mitigate this by allowing a depressive reading to push from the other direction: I am not special or superior to other trans people, and it would be the height of paternalistic arrogance to take personal responsibility for trans liberation, care and excellence. I can remain committed to those things and acknowledge that being a part of a community sometimes means resting and accepting care from others, t4t can't work if no one is allowed to be vulnerable. Accepting time in a vulnerable position means letting go of the paranoid drive to keep up and instead sitting with the difficult feelings of the present. This is the numb temptation of the vortex.

11.2 May 2025

Would it shock you to learn that treating my grief like an academic opportunity whilst it was still fresh was not a sustainable coping mechanism? So, you will have to forgive the sudden gap, in which I delved into theory, the more abstract the better, which allowed me to develop the analysis of my data but also provided some reprieve from myself, something that can be hard to come by in "me-search".

I am very grateful to my past self for documenting the content and frequency of trans posts in my social media feeds at that time, as the act of doomscrolling, which I now understand as the impasse of dogpaddling through constant crises, rarely results in a detailed and reliable timeline of memory. The vortex is never-ending and infinity cannot

be stored, never mind processed. I think I had the intention of creating a systematic snapshot archive, similar to Konemann's transphobia log *The Appendix* (2021), but, as one would expect, my state of mind biased what I found notable, and I neglected to make a note of the many positives facilitated by social media during this time.

For example, an aspect I did not document was the ways in which social media allowed my community to support each other and share our grief in a way that did not overburden any one person. When I shared a poem on Instagram, someone who was feeling resilient enough to see how I was feeling would offer support. Likewise, when I saw others posting about their grief publicly, but to no one in particular, I could let them know I was there if they needed anything. The intimacy of this digital care web not only allowed us to witness each other's grief, it distributed the weight of its members' needs to the places they could be held.

This only worked most of the time. When grief would wake me with a start in the early hours, with a feeling like my heart had just remembered it had left the oven on, vague-posting into the void of the night was unlikely to result in prompt support from someone resilient. Often, on these occasions, I would make more frank posts about how I was struggling, only to delete them before morning. My imagined counterintimacy ghosted me, so I pretended I hadn't said anything. This is the downside of diffusing responsibility throughout a network, no one was directly addressed, so no one saw and no one answered. Luckily I had a network of loved-ones directly checking-in as well, who, if I got to the point I really had to talk to someone, I could call regardless of the time of day. Social media helped here as well; not all my friends were unfortunate enough to be practised at talking to people who have been bereaved by suicide, and in the absence of knowing what to say, they would send me memes and posts to show they were thinking of me.

Eventually, the bad outweighed the good as I found myself spending more and more time doomscrolling in bed, and I deleted scrolling-feed social media apps from my phone. I still checked in on them on my laptop, but this was a more mindful and delineated type of engagement. I was only able to do this because of my AFK support network, who would come and spend time with me without expecting much in the way of responsiveness. Without AFK support, scrolling social media would have been my only

low-energy access to community, as I was mostly capable of micro-interactions such as likes and shares, for which feed-based platforms are best suited, rather than the longer form posts of other types of digital communication. This may have been sustainable had I already cultivated a positive scrolling space on a platform with strong enough tagging and muting features to avoid negative vortextuality, such as Tumblr, but most of my network was on other platforms, and I had not anticipated the need for such a space in advance, so I had never put the effort into building one.

As life gradually returned to a new normal, I found it increasingly inconvenient not to have social media on my phone. Friends would send me direct messages on social media platforms instead of texting me, and I would not see the messages until hours later, meanwhile my lack of responsiveness had meant I had missed out on an activity or caused concern. Soon, I relented and redownloaded the apps to my phone. I still get pulled into doomscrolling on a personalised vortex of negative trans content, irrespective of my insight into the phenomenon, but now the period of acute distress has passed, the affective experience plateaus at a mundane, bearable level of negativity that is the cost of live response-ability to my network and broader counterintimacy.

12 Data Chapter 5: Imagined Futures

12.1 Introduction

The previous data chapters examined the ambivalent and nuanced relationship young trans participants have with social media as they have already experienced it. This final data chapter explores participants' responses to the prompt of what they envisioned an ideal version of social media would look like for trans youth, including technological and organisational features but also how they wish other users would behave. Their answers ranged from very modest requests to utopic imaginaries for large-scale restructuring. Ideas and wishes for how social media could be improved came up throughout the data, not just in answer to the final prompts, and there will be much referring back to previous chapters. This final chapter of data analysis examines the themes along this scale of ambition for change.

12.2 Compassion and grace from others

The most prominent theme that emerged when participants were asked directly what they wished for social media was the desire for trans youth to be granted some compassion and respite from hostility whilst they fumble their way through identity work:

> "Social media is definitely a learning, trial-and-error process - trans youth are likely venturing into social media as. way to express themselves, which they may be unable to do at home, and therefore an audience should thus be patient with said young person as they begin to grow into their ideal version of themselves." -BlueDuck, 18

There is awareness of the "trial and error" process of learning how to manage social media, which is the case for all young people, but trans young people have to do this in a sociocultural environment in which they are objects of hypervisibility singled out for punishment e.g. most online gamers have *witnessed* homophobic abuse and threats of physical and sexual violence (Kowert & Cook, 2022) but OrangeStingray was its direct target. Thus, the fear and instant embattlement of coming into a trans identity online emerges as the priority for change for many participants:

> "For what people should understand about trans youth is that we just wanna be us, we just want to live our lives & we're not trying to make a big song & dance out of it we just want people to be a bit kinder & more accepting? If you can't

> accept us, at least do us the favour of not telling us that you can't? Makes things a tad easier. We're not trying to infringe upon you, or take away your rights, & we're DEFINITELY not trying to groom your kids, we're just trying to find out who we are & social media can be really helpful with that? So just like cut us some slack a bit?" -PurpleTurtle, 20

Many of the participants seem to view the reactionary, hostile engagements trans people are targeted with as knee-jerk responses originating from a place of ignorance. As a result, it was often expressed that slight efforts in self-education and empathy from others would make a considerable improvement in trans youths' experience of identity work online:

> "I don't know what the ideal experience would look like, but I wish that people would understand trans people before posting about them on social media. I also wish people understood that a lot of trans people posting on social media are either looking for a community (as we've spoken about) or are probably scared of being rejected by the cis people in their following - especially if it's early in their transition - and just to have a little respect." – GreenGriffin, 21

> "I don't really have an ideal, but I agree that I wish people would think and try to understand us before fighting against us online. I also wish that youth wouldn't have to see all the negativity and hate comments that surround us all as a community." – BlackCat, 24

The modesty of these wishes speaks of an understanding that social media as a technology encourages speedy, paranoid posting and disincentivises considered, nuanced posting. Even in their ideal imaginary, participants still saw transphobia as existing, just less actively, "If you can't accept us, at least do us the favour of not telling us that you can't". This creates a kind of depressed trans utopic imaginary, in which bigotry is understood to be impossible to extinguish entirely but is factored into a respectful live-and-let-live communication environment.

The least optimistic view expressed by a participant was that it is too unrealistic to hope that people will become compassionate, or even indifferent, towards trans youth on social media, but hoped that hate could be contained to online spaces where the affordances of social media gave the most control over experience:

> "All we want is to be accepted & people to not make a big deal out of it? Like I hate whenever I'm planning to go visit people having to be like "am *I* gonna be alright coming?", especially when the people you don't expect to say no do (especially when priority is given to a cishet transphobic misogynist, but i digress). I think social media is a place where loads of misinformation & transphobia collects, but I'm of the point of view (and I could very much be the

> outlier here) that I kinda prefer it? Like I've accepted that there's always gonna be transphobes around, hate to say it but it's true. And I would much rather have them come on social media where I can block / delete them, rather than saying those same things to my face in real life? I'm an anxious human as it is, & don't get me wrong getting it on social media is still bad & would hurt as hell, but I, personally, have more control laying in bed or sitting at work reading it on my phone & deleting it, than someone yelling it in a public place. In a perfect world, this doesn't exist anywhere, but if it's got to, I'd prefer it to come online (especially when you can report it & there's proof, so something can be done about it)." – PurpleTurtle, 20

PurpleTurtle has been quoted previously as holding the ambivalence of social media experience and preferring it to an imagined worse outcome e.g. not having the anonymity that affords her freedom of expression would be worse than the current situation of risking hate from anonymous trolls. The beginning of her quote here does not relate to social media, but it gives an insight into what she compares her social media experience to. AFK, she feels she must be hyperaware of who will share physical space with her and plan ahead for any risks they pose, as once she is in that physical space, she has much less agency over the situation. Block features, for as long as they continue to exist, and an evidentiary record of data, mean she always has the agency to do something. The depressed position of appreciating the ambivalent affordances of social media is partly borne of feeling she cannot afford to take anything other than a paranoid position AFK.

12.3 Improved content moderation

Whilst a utopic version of social media would include other users being respectful to trans youth, PurpleTurtle was not the only participant to acknowledge that there are "always going to be transphobes around". Other participants proposed improvements to existing platforms or imagined new spaces that would minimise the negative impact of trans-antagonism:

> **"**I think the 'ideal' social media experience for me would be one that does actually acknowledge how much negativity there is surrounding our spaces, and censoring that. I totally believe in being able to have freedom of speech - but having a space that is kept safe and positive for us is so crucial. Actually monitoring and making sure nobody is spewing hate speech would be so wonderful. All hate speech regardless of identity should be prohibited in an ideal world.
>
> I wish people understood it's not as simple as just logging off. It's so hard when you're constantly surrounded with hate in the world, and ideally social media

> should be a safe space for all. I wish people understood that the hate we face isn't just offline, or online, it's both and unfortunately it's growing more constant." – IndigoFrog, 22

Here IndigoFrog acknowledges the impossibility of truly separating online and AFK life. Both PurpleTurtle and IndigoFrog express resignation to the permanence of AFK transphobia and their lack of control of their reception of it in face-to-face environments. In this attitude of depressive realism, several participants described their ideal social media as one where platforms have robust safety and privacy affordances rather than an unimaginable utopia in which other users showed compassion.

IndigoFrog refers to content moderation often being framed as existing in opposition to free speech[37] and rejects this. As shown in previous chapters, experiencing and witnessing anti-trans hostility and harassment was reported by many participants as having a silencing effect on them, which is supported by existing literature (Kender & Spiel, 2025). In public discourse around transphobia and free speech, this silencing effect of transphobia is often neglected in favour of prioritising the speech of those with anti-trans views (Baker, 2023), meaning trans people must accept abuse as a condition of access (Ahmed, 2025a) to social media. This is an example of what Cross (2024) names the "Mobius strip of reality and unreality" of social media espoused by those who defend abuse online; it is a space consequential enough for free speech absolutism to be a serious issue, but inconsequential enough that abuse is not.

Addressing this disparity is not as simple as acknowledging that transphobia is worthy of moderation. Once that hurdle has been cleared, there are complex issues regarding how effective moderation can be practised. Content moderation is often disproportionately applied to different groups, with marginalised groups such as trans and Black people likely to experience innocuous content being removed (Haimson et al. 2021a). Automated moderation often punishes marginalised posters because it can only recognise patterns and key terms, not discern context, meaning a trans person quoting abuse that has been aimed at them is treated identically as abuse aimed at others. What isn't automated is often outsourced to hyper-exploited populations working under extreme pressure (Equidem, 2025) who lack the time and resources to investigate

[37] Freedom of speech being the reason given for the downgrading and removal of hate speech rules on Meta and X platforms.

context (Wilson & Land, 2020), with similar results. Both automated and human moderation frequently categorise the topic of transness as inherently sexual or adult, which has been an issue for trans counterintimacies since the beginning of the internet (Dame-Griff, 2023). All of the above combined with trans-hostile actors mass-reporting trans content and otherwise misusing moderation features meant to make platforms safer (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), means ideal moderation as described by IndigoFrog would differ significantly from what is currently widely implemented.

Existing literature has noted a major issue in effective moderation being one of scale (Kender & Spiel, 2025; Wilson & Land, 2020); sweeping moderation policies on large, centralised platforms are too unwieldy to effectively address the nuances of moderating the many counterintimacies they host. So, to conceive of ideal moderation, it is necessary to look to smaller, decentralised spaces:

> "in terms of safety, again, it depends so much on the instance[38]! my partner's instance is owned and moderated by some really good mods, and my instance is moderated by a really active team too. each instacne gets to develop its own community rules etc. so it is genuinely so unique ot the instance, whcih is what i like!" -OrangeZebra

Manageably-sized walled gardens such as Mastodon instances or the LGBTQIA+ spaces GreenGriffin spoke of moderating can develop and enforce their own agreed contract of behaviour with a few internal volunteers. This brings up the question of the labour of unpaid moderation. Existing research (Zhang et al., 2024) is consistent with GreenGriffin's experience of finding the labour a worthwhile way to give back due to the community value they had previously received from online LGBT+ spaces. Whereas BlueCrab described their moderation work as a responsibility to the baby trans of their trans counterintimacy, in their role as a relatively resilient elder by comparison.

12.4 Separatism

Smaller spaces with independent, bottom-up moderation do not have to be trans or queer-specific to be trans inclusive. However, due to many of the experiences discussed in previous data chapters, a separate platform specifically for LGBTQ people was suggested as an ideal social media space:

[38] "Instance" being the name on Mastodon for each independently managed space on the platform.

> "More policing on harassment and hate crimes online would also allow social media to become a much safer space for trans young people. Perhaps a social media platform built by LGBTQ people for LGBTQ people would be beneficial in allowing gender diverse young people to interact and engage with other people of diverse identities, something in which they may not be able to do in-real-life, though I am unsure just how possible or practical this idea is. The ideal social media experience for a trans young person would be free of bigotry and exposure to potential harm, allowing them to freely and confidently express and experiment with their identities." -BlueDuck, 18

This is not a novel idea. Haimson et al. (2020) studied the trans-specific social media site Trans Time, which featured platform affordances designed with trans people in mind, meaning users did not have to jerry-rig something that had not been built with them in mind. On Trans Time, safety and privacy features were designed with an understanding of the issues trans people face, and the content warning system provided users with a high degree of agency over what they were exposed to.

A paradoxical effect of gathering separately for safety is that this can create a convenient target for anti-trans actions. This can range from overt, networked "raids" to covert infiltration, with a range of trolling and harassment in between. For example, since 2020, anti-LGBT users of 4chan have taken part in mass homophobic and transphobic online action in June every year, naming it "Operation Pridefall', in which one of their array of tactics is creating profiles of fictional LGBT+ people in queer spaces to start intracommunity conflict and worsen the public image of the community (Doherty, 2020). In an environment of escalating moral panic about the autonomy of trans youth, trans youth spaces are also vulnerable to such actions from mainstream institutions, such as in 2022, when journalists infiltrated the service user message board of trans youth charity Mermaids and then reported on its contents (Bannerman, 2022).

Even if a trans platform can effectively guard its boundaries from would-be invaders, it was shown in the earlier examination of intracommunity conflict and trans-produced negative content that a trans space would not be "free of exposure to potential harm" (Malatino, 2022; Marvin, 2022) as t4t still includes conflict and harms. This is not unique to trans people, as a space for human interaction (or even human-machine interaction) will never be completely free of harm. Acknowledgement of this is why many who strive for harm mitigation now use the language of "safer spaces" rather than "safe spaces" (Kender & Spiel, 2025).

It is thus unlikely that LGBT+ or trans-specific platform would be truly utopic, but it may reduce a lot of the potential harms in the ways found by Haimson et al (2020). Potential concerns about being limited to the echo chambers of separatist spaces are mitigated by the ubiquitous practice of multitool appage. Trans youth are unlikely to use a trans-only platform exclusively, but its existence as a safer space to do more vulnerable posting, especially experimental identity work, could provide vital respite from the risks of wider publics.

The paradox of separatist trans spaces being particularly useful for identity work and early transition experimentation (Haimson et al., 2020) is that a degree of identity certainty is required to join a trans-only space initially. Due to their security features creating walled gardens, they do not have the gradual on-ramp quality that queer-friendly spaces dedicated to a secondary interest (e.g. fandoms) have.

Separatist spaces as just one arm of a trans counterintimacy multitool would allow for other arms to be taken up by more diverse online spaces where solidarities can be built across marginalisations without such bridging labour necessarily falling on those with intersectional trans-subjecthood (Kender & Spiel, 2025), allowing for the possibility of them being uplifted by a wider range of people, even if this is not currently often the case (e.g. OrangeStingray's experience of lack of intersectional support).

12.5 Recovering the past

A rare but present techno-pessimism in the data agreed with Cross' (2024) conclusion that the best kind of social media is no, or a very pared back, social media:

> "Idrk I think just like a postal service where its basically queer pen pals with the ability to meet up if you wanted to would be my ideal social setting. I guess that's not really a media though, so honestly I'm not sure aha. I feel like I'm just put off by social media as a whole, I've made more lasting relationships from actually meeting queer people irl I guess" -FlorescentBeetle, 18

We can infer the increasing popularity of the prospect of an internet environment that is "like a postal service" amongst the general population from the huge growth of newsletter blog services such as Substack in recent years (Hobbs, 2021). With digital newsletters, there is still a mixture of positive and negative potential for their affordances, as the autonomy and semi-privacy that makes them safer than social media

for trans organising and communication without oversight also has the same benefits for far-right and anti-trans actors (Bush, 2024).

Data Chapters 3 & 4 showed how AFK community was vital to balancing online well-being, but the context collapse of everything being in the same place on social media made it difficult to avoid the harmful aspects of centralised platforms when using them to look for AFK event details. So, whilst many would not be satisfied with emails and newsletters alone, having the option to stay up to date this way may be useful for the times when youth want to take a well-being break from social media.

Short of a return to letter writing, several participants spoke of their ideal social media being more like platforms were in the past, with a few modifications, implying a path correction at an earlier stage would have avoided a lot of the pitfalls of the current environment:

> "The old days of twitter preferably, minus the transphobes, terfs, racists, ableists etc. Just a bunch of people being kind and understanding instead of fighting each other. The closest I've found to the ideal is queer bookstagram, but that involves like actual effort in making a post, so something like twitter where it doesn't matter would make that better. If bluesky fully picks up I'm hoping thatll become the current like,, preferred social media if that makes sense? Like the least bad social media, one where we can be ourselves without having to worry about being attacked." – BlueDog, 23

Since data was collected Bluesky has seen huge growth (Boyd, 2024). It has affordances such as blocklists, tag lists and follow lists, similar to an earlier iteration of Twitter (now X). These features are closer to the ideal affordances for content moderation described earlier in the chapter.

> "tumblr but without the discourse ! (and decentralised ;))
>
> for real though, i did enjoy my time on tumblr a lot. the culture of tumblr is just naturally a lot more anonymous than other social media, so it lends well to allowing queer youth to be open, because there's less of a risk of discovery. if we encouraged and fostered healthier behaviours there (e.g. decentralised moderation to discourage useless discourse and objectively harmful ed rhetoric) it'd be a really amazing place for self discovery i think" – OrangeZebra, 20

This description of past-Tumblr fits with Haimson's (2021) description of it as a trans technology due to its specific affordances related to "temporality, openness, change, separation, realness, intersectionality, and erotics" before the "Tumblrpocalypse" of 2018 in which the banning of adult content prompted many LGBT+ users to leave the

platform. OrangeZebra speaks of the "culture of Tumblr". As explored previously when examining algorithms, this felt sense of "platform spirit" is co-constructed between the users and the technological and policy features (Mayworm et al. 2024; Devito, 2022). When features or policies change, as in the cases of X (formerly Twitter) and Tumblr, this changes, often woundingly, the users' sense of the platform spirit.

Koutropoulos et al. (2024) define this feeling of "digital nostos" as "a longing to return to a digital place where we felt at home". It is possible that this fondness for past iterations of platforms is simply nostalgia rather than indicative of a material worsening of experience. However, what has become known as the "enshittification" of the internet is becoming increasingly acknowledged and studied by analysts (Birch, 2023; Koutropoulos et al., 2024). First coined by the digital activist Doctorow (2023), he uses "enshittification" to describe the lifecycle of digital platforms in which the owners/management: begin by providing a good experience to attract users, then degrade the user experience to better serve their business customers, then disregard the value to the business customers to maximise value for themselves, before finally the platforms die. This process has most recently and dramatically been recorded in the case of X (formally Twitter), which, since its purchase by Elon Musk in 2022, has seen a weakening of safety features and moderation in favour of "free speech", causing an increase in bot accounts (Taylor, 2023) and hate speech on the platform, which led to the loss of high-value advertisers (Lee, 2024). Combined, these issues have led to a mass exodus of users to newer platforms such as Bluesky and Threads (Boyd, 2024). This process has become prominent enough in public discourse for "enshittification" to be named Australia's Macquarie Dictionary word of the year 2024 (Sheperd, 2024).

Digital nomadism and migration[39] are the terms used for the practice of users chasing the platforms that are currently in the phase of treating their users well, this is a less than satisfactory solution to enshittification as it means giving up platform-specific identities every time a move is deemed necessary (Koutropoulos et al., 2024). This has implications for trans youth as participants invested significant labour into maintaining

[39] Koutropoulos et al. (2024) argue that none of these terms of physical displacement fit neatly onto the digital movement they describe, but better terms have yet to be proposed.

boundaries of outness and/or purpose on various platforms and accounts, as addressed in Data Chapter 1.

In Data Chapters 3 & 4, participants used addiction-related language such as "compulsion" and "cold-turkey" when describing how they find it difficult to disengage from negative trans content. A great deal of research has been done into "social media addiction" from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Doctorow (2024) argues that rather than addiction, users stay on bad platforms and struggle to migrate to new ones because of network effects (Katz & Shapiro, 1985). That is, not only do users put labour into maintaining their various accounts, they are also embedded in networks that are unlikely to all move to the same new platform together, so migrating risks a certain amount of network loss. Doctorow (2024) attributes this "high switching cost" to a lack of interoperability of platforms, as it is in their business interests to discourage migration, and as Edwards & Boellstorff (2021) put it, "there are no affordances for retaining an individual or collective social media lineage as platforms change and die." This may be a particularly salient issue for physically dispersed marginalised networks such as trans youth, their known networks can be maintained via multitool appage, but the wider trans counterintimacy must be rediscovered on each new platform.

12.6 Differently structured spaces

To take the precarity out of online trans counterintimacies at the platform level and make them stable digital "homes", and in the process move them closer to becoming a true affective commons, ongoing cycles of enshittification would have to be interrupted. Several participants recognised the inherent role of neoliberal logics in what had made platforms worse and expressed hopes for less corporate platform structures, not only to avoid having to make regular moves but also to make possible features that put wellbeing before profit.

12.6.1 Algorithmic agency

In addition to escaping enshittification, It was demonstrated in Data Chapter 3 that attempts at asserting agency on vortex-prone platforms can only work so well, and some participants described how they had migrated to spaces that do not use algorithms, such as decentralised platforms (e.g. Mastodon) or walled gardens (e.g. Discord servers).

However, those same participants speculated that it would have been more difficult to find everything they benefited from when they were younger and using algorithm-driven platforms if they had used non-algorithmic and/or decentralised platforms instead:

> “I think young me would've found it harder just because it's not like. as obvious? to find stuff, and there's no algorithm that 'curates' stuff for you. I think it is definitely best suited to older ppl w/ a bit more experience on social media who know what they want out of a network, rather than ppl starting from scratch.” - OrangeZebra, 20

This alludes to an ambivalence towards algorithms as their effects are not entirely negative, especially for those in the early stages of identity work. Previous research has found platforms with notoriously sensitive algorithms, such as TikTok, are able to identify LGBT+ users and cater their promoted content accordingly before the user has realised that they are LGBT+ themselves, and thus the algorithm becomes instrumental in recognising this about themselves (Myles et al. 2023). Opportunities for visibility in the form of “algorithmic doors” (DeVito, 2022) are also potential benefits (and risks) that were examined in the context of outness in previous chapters.

As displayed in BlueLobster’s quote below, the ideal situation imagined by many participants for the structure of social media would feature algorithms that have been altered to better serve the user’s needs and wants, rather than removing algorithms altogether.

> **“**My perfect social media experience would probably be changing the algorithms so that posts are in chronological order on your Instagram feed (the only thing I really use) because I find that if I like a few trans posts in a row, or a few football posts, or a few neurodivergent posts, that becomes all I see for a week or so. If things were chronological, I feel like I'd be able to avoid the dysphoria of feeling like my feed was targeted to one part of my identity and get less burned-out when it comes to the negative gender-related news articles that come up.“ – BlueLobster, 20

Many critics of the algorithmic flattening of social media experience, both cis and trans, have called for a reduction in the use of learning algorithms online to return the possibilities of happening across things by accident provided by web 1.0 (Lu, 2023, Chayka, 2024) and the possibility for experimental identity work with less risk of exposure. However, with the escalating hostility towards trans people resulting in schools and universities retreating from affirming practices and diverse curricula, young trans people are arguably likely to become more reliant on the internet for agentic

learning of the type already documented by Jenzen (2017) and Kennedy (2021). The removal of algorithms could put young people questioning their gender back in the web 1.0 position of needing to have a fairly clear idea of what to look for before they can find it. This leads to a catch-22 of identity work needing to already be at a certain stage before online resources for identity work can be sought, as with the paradox of trans separatist spaces.

Airoldi (2021, p134) argues that algorithms help shape what is thinkable regardless of what is technically available:

> "One might object that slight changes in habits produced by narrow machine learning systems bear no particular importance. After all, weren't those computationally recommended videos and pictures already available on the platforms, uploaded by some human? Sure. Couldn't the user have simply typed in the search bar to find them? Unlikely."

As such, algorithms have the potential to deliver and shape previously unthought-of possibilities that expand (or limit) the potential for identity work beyond what users can imagine alone. It is the way in which algorithms are currently deployed by major platforms that comes with the accompanying harms examined in previous data chapters.

Airoldi (2021, p97) argues that to achieve a strong alignment in human-machine interaction, a collaborative relationship can only take place during "transparent co-production"; that is, conditions where there is "low informational asymmetry". This would mean, rather than having to guess what an algorithm is prioritising to attempt to "train" it, being able to directly access and edit the algorithms' goals to a personalised result. Such transparency and agency over the way algorithms operate would mean trans youth like BlueLobster could customise the type of things they are shown to match what they know about their own well-being and learning needs, without having to sacrifice the "creepy" benefits of algorithms being an active co-producer in their online curation by promoting content that is relevant but they would not know how to seek out alone.

A barrier to this ideal structure of algorithms is the profit motives of neo-liberal platform capitalism. As explained above in the enshittification lifecycle of social media platforms, positive customer experience is only an initial concern, followed by advertisers, who are unlikely to see the appeal in a platform that allows their users to customise their way to minimal ads.

12.6.2 Anti-capitalist decentralisation

As covered in the background literature, the internet and its social spaces weren't always so centralised onto a handful of websites; from 1980 when Usenet was launched as a decentralised network without a central server, through to it being common for people to build and maintain their own website homepages and message boards (Dame-Griff, 2023).

> "i'm ambivalent toward 'social media' in itself right now, and my main focus is on using better structured media. this is mostly in the form of migrating to open source & decentralised networks (such as mastodon) because i've become a lot more interested in avoiding Dictator Style Corporations (like twitter) and also want to champion free software (free as in freedom, not price!) as much as i can. i think a lot of trans people (at least the ones i know, which are more techy than the average person!) are in support of a move to free & decentralised networks. i think it can offer the best for us as a trans community in terms of safety too." - OrangeZebra, 20

Such a desire for a return to decentralised internet structures is more than digital nostros. As Kender & Spiel (2025) point out, requests for reforms to neoliberal social media platforms to promote trans well-being are never going to be willingly met if they go against the companies' profit motives, which, as demonstrated in the algorithm section above, they invariably do. This is the reason Haimson et al. (2021) argues not only that "a real trans technology would be designed specifically by and for trans people" but also that this must be built "outside of capitalist frameworks" (p.357). Decentralised, federated social media systems such as Mastodon are not run for-profit (Abbing, 2023), and thus are not incentivised against unprofitable features that are beneficial to users.

The limiting implication of independent, decentralised social media as an ideal form of trans technology, as OrangeZebra hints at, is that it requires "techy" users, as already mentioned regarding the lack of algorithms. This may not necessarily be the case for all users, but maintenance of such spaces will require some users to perform knowledgeable, unpaid labour (Abbing, 2023). Research into the motivations of people who become moderators on Mastodon by Zhang et al (2024) found the main themes to be creating private, safe and inclusive spaces, free of algorithmic manipulation. This matches what OrangeZebra has said about the site and decentralised networks more generally and is promising for facilitating trans commoning practices. However, whilst there may be less risk of external harassment on decentralised node-structured social

media, there may be a higher risk of intracommunity harm if a node develops a harmful culture (Zhang et al. 2024), as traditional safety tools don't work in a decentralised network, they are dependent on local node rules and enforcement by individual moderators of those nodes, as explored earlier in the chapter. Arguably, a single node run by a despot is a smaller problem than a whole platform run by a dictator, to paraphrase OrangeZebra, as one can leave for a better-managed node. There is also the issue of data storage, which becomes less sticky than data on centralised platforms, but is then at greater risk of disappearing when a node does (Abbing, 2023). It is important to recognise these potential shortcomings for these ideal forms of social media rather than formulate them as utopic, as is in keeping with a depressed trans reading that values the liveable in the imperfect, and a t4t ethics of care that values the imperfect as an improvement on what came before.

12.7 Conclusion

Whilst the social solution of kindness and grace from others would be part of a utopic vision, most participants, even in imagining their ideal, held a position of depressive realism that transphobia will always be present online. This led to a range of imagined social media forms, from expressions of digital nostros for past iterations of platforms that had better safety and curation features before the process of enshittificaiton degraded them, to completely restructured spaces that are not run on the logics of capitalism. Data suggests that increased user agency over all aspects of social media would have the potential to maximise the positive aspects of trans youth social media experiences, but this raises the issue of voluntary labour. Trans youth may find it rewarding to help maintain these spaces, or they may find it a draining obligation to members of the counterintimacy they judge to be more in need than themselves, most likely an ambivalent mix, as no social endeavour can be without inconvenience, but this does not mean they are not worth the work (Berlant, 2022).

13 Conclusion

In the context of a culture in the UK of escalating transphobia with an increasing focus on the denial of autonomy to trans youth, this study aimed to amplify the voices of a rarely listened to group regarding their experiences around an area of popular moral panic, their use of social media, and analyse the resulting themes.

This resulted in the formulation of the following research questions:

1. How do UK trans youth conceive of and experience the affordances of the social media they use?
2. What is the affective experience of being a trans young person on social media in the UK?
3. How do UK trans youth negotiate the costs and risks of social media, and what do they wish was different?
4. How do intersections of gender, sexuality, race, disability etc. relate to the above?

After recruiting 17 trans youth aged 17-24 and conducting AOFGs to discuss their social media experiences, the main themes that emerged from the data were collected under: building identity and community, visibility traps and doors, negative vortextuality, transphobia and imagined futures. Answers to the research questions were found in each of these and are signposted in brackets in the summary below.

The data showed trans youth held a great deal of ambivalence towards social media, with most participants concluding that it has been a net good in their lives. Participants developed a tactical multitooling of various platforms to get access to all the affordances they need, but this took time to establish (1,3). Social media was particularly important for identity work and emotional support in the early stages of participants' identity development, but this is also when they were most vulnerable to being set back by negative social media experiences (1,2). Both the anonymity afforded by lurking and the non-committal experimentation afforded by fandom and other secondary interest spaces appeared to help maximise comfort during this agentic learning period (1,2). This did not mean that all participants then went on to be out as trans in all online contexts, or any at all, once they had done their identity work, and managing differing levels of outness across multiple accounts and platforms becomes a routine but vigilant aspect of

daily labour (1,3). Due to the longevity of digital memory, this anxiety about data management persists past the moment of posting, with retroactive privacy concerns being expressed about years old activity that may still be recorded and thus discoverable somewhere online (2). Emotional support from other trans and queer people online emerged as vital to many participants and was often provided in the relative safety of walled-gardens such as private accounts or servers (1,2). However, trans spaces were not described in utopic terms as participants were frank about many issues, including intracommunity conflict around gender theory. Nonbinary participants were particularly impacted by intracommunity conflict on the topic of the boundaries of transness, as this led them to believe they had no place in trans counterintimacies for some time (2).

Participants described greatly valuing the posts of other trans people, from celebrities and influencers who do education and trans activism work, to their peers just living their lives (1,2). These visible trans people represented possibilities for trans life in ways both affirming and restrictive. Many expressed the desire to contribute to the positive aspect of this value for others with their own public content; however, posting publicly about trans topics was seen as a deeply embattled and laborious experience, particularly for multiply marginalised trans content creators (2,3,4). This resulted in few visible possibilities for out trans people other than the most privileged influencers who are most able to minimise personal risk, leading to the cruel optimism of a model of liveable life unreachable by most (2).

Whilst participants were not tied to one platform, they did express a tendency to get sucked into doomscrolling on a vortex of negative trans content, made up of bad trans news, trans people expressing negative emotions, and vicarious transphobia (2,3). The contributing forces to this vortex of negative content were felt to be a combination of algorithmic promotion and trans people sharing it (1). An expressed commitment to an imagined trans counterintimacy who needed them to bear witness was one feature of an intimacy undertow, attaching trans youth to, and drawing them into, the vortex. Participants described getting stuck doomscrolling in this vortex from an anxious compulsion, theorised as dogpaddling in an impasse of never-ending crises to, at best, remain in place (2).

Participants commonly expressed feeling this negative vortextuality had a detrimental effect on their well-being and enumerated strategies they used to escape it (3). Curating their social media feeds as much as possible through "training" algorithms and using affordances such as tagging and muting could go some way towards mitigating vortextuality. However, the most mentioned effective strategy was taking breaks from platforms that they noticed impacting their well-being, sometimes enforcing this with time-limit widgets if they found it difficult to take breaks of their own volition (3). Respite from the negativity of these platforms had to be balanced against the cost of missing out on community event information; this was easier for participants who had supportive and accessible AFK community and/or engaging AFK hobbies (2,3). Participants whose support networks were physically inaccessible either due to distance, disability or both set up walled gardens on platforms such as Discord where they could safely communicate without the risks of public posting (3,4).

Direct transphobia was less common than the ubiquitousness of negative trans content, but it was experienced enough and in such distressing forms that it had a profound impact on how participants related to social media (2,3). As well as individual abuse, networked harassment could be maintained over many days and technological affordances could be used to semi-automate harassment on trans-related content (1). Witnessing this direct transphobia combined with negative trans content meant coming into a trans identity online also meant being instantly plunged into an existential battle, which could lead to what is theorised as Rapid Onset Trans Rage, but was more often met with a chilling of speech on the part of participants, who felt driven from public online life (2,3).

Technological affordances that have been experienced as helping to tackle direct transphobia include reporting, blocking and block lists, all of which are features that have been weakened or removed by many major platforms (1,3). Some participants expressed an obligation to the trans counterintimacy to engage in counter-speech to online transphobia (2). However, using judgment to discern whether someone displaying ignorance is worth the labour of educating or whether they are engaging in bad faith and should thus be blocked (1) is something that only experienced participants were confident with, whereas younger participants felt more obliged to argue in every case (2,3). In contrast, supporting the victim of transphobia was always seen as worthwhile;

the visible absence of support for victims and/or the presence of agreement with the perpetrator being one of the more distressing aspects of online transphobia (2,3).

Whilst all participants who compared online to AFK transphobia stated that hate was much more frequent online, this experience varied in affective impact. For a significant number of participants, this was comforting as it helped them to devalue social media as not “real life”, whereas it could also be interpreted as feeling surrounded by secretly transphobic people AFK, which increased anxiety (2,3).

Imagining an ideal future version of social media for trans youth, participants had a range of ideas, from the modest hope that other people show compassion or at least leave trans youth to their own devices, to utopic anti-capitalist restructuring of the technological architecture of social media platforms themselves (3). Most wanted more agency and control over their online environments, so they could build a space where they felt safe enough to experiment and relax as trans youth without feeling embattled but retaining the positive affordances of more open online space (3).

13.1 Contribution to knowledge

Whilst there was much in the data that supports existing literature on the experiences of trans youth on social media, there also emerged a range of novel contributions to knowledge:

13.1.1 Methods

Whilst the aim was to recruit a varied range of trans young people, and it was anticipated that participants would be recruited who were at various stages of transition and/or outness, it was not predicted that the privacy and safety features of a method designed with this in mind would also appeal to trans people who are stealth. However, it became evident that anonymous online asynchronous focus groups and interviews have utility for gathering data from stealth trans people. This method also seemed well-suited for the participation of neurodivergent and disabled trans people due to its accessibility. Thus, future research into these demographics may be aided by use of AOFGs.

13.1.2 Results

It is already established that there is no hard boundary between different platforms and AFK life in how social media is used, but trans youth deploying multitool appage as a

strategy to facilitate network maintenance across different levels of privacy and needs is previously unexplored.

The experiences of trans youth who are stealth and those planning to go stealth in the future are unrepresented in existing literature, particularly the retroactive privacy concerns this produces regarding social media data. This is joined by the chilling of speech and retreat from public online life by participants more generally due to fear of transphobic abuse.

Whilst there is a great deal written about the need for visible trans joy, there is an absence of work on the importance of public trans mundanity. This is especially stark in its absence as a possibility model and the effect this has on the scope of liveable trans lives. This finding, along with algorithmically-cocreated transnormativity of the types of out transness most visible on social media, produced novel data on how extreme an extent of possibility-flattening (trans excellence or nothing) can become internalised by trans youth.

There is very little existing literature on doomscrolling outside of the context of Covid-19 and none that incorporates vortextuality or trans people. The cycle of doomscrolling in negative vortextuality and its affective driving force is formulated here for the first time. Other affect-related terms coined include intimacy undertow and Rapid Onset Trans Rage. Intimacy undertow was developed to bring together observed affective motivators such as a sense of t4t responsibility and fear of missing out on community events. Rapid Onset Trans Rage is named in this work in a manner that nods at satirical but is also in earnest, as it describes the overwhelming affective blast of coming into an identity that is so deeply embattled against hostility. There is also very little existing research on t4t eldering as a practice that is more related to transition time than linear age. Findings here suggest that the figure of the younger/less experienced trans person may be an important attachment element of the trans intimacy undertow as an obligatory subject of care.

Third-order harassment online led by highly connected accounts, often public figures, is something that is gradually garnering academic attention. However, the harassment on social media of trans youth by older adults is not something that has been published before. It is generally difficult to assess the age of perpetrators of online transphobic

abuse as they are unlikely to consent to being included in research, but as this data included harassment by a public figure, the victim was able to confirm that he was much older, and also made this claim of the overall demographic of their harassers. This is a significant and concerning finding. The experience of being the target of harassment that has been semi-automated using social media affordances such as topic alerts is another worrying finding, as it weaponizes features that allow trans people to find each other, making it difficult to propose recommendations for solutions.

The extensive study of minority stress has examined the negative impact of indirect discrimination on the well-being of marginalised groups, mostly LGBTQ+ people. However, this has not been used to address the impact of being exposed to vicarious transphobia on social media. Additionally, while some research has been done on social media schadenfreude aimed at marginalised groups, this is the first report of both the role of algorithmic promotion in this phenomenon and the affective experience of witnessing en masse endorsement of the immiseration of trans people for trans youth on social media. The intersectional impact of vicarious transphobia, particularly the absence of support for racialised trans people facing abuse, is not new knowledge in general, see existing work on trans necropolitics, but the impact witnessing this online has on young racialised trans people is previously unreported.

The finding that transphobic hate was experienced as being worse online than AFK is a new finding that sits uncomfortably alongside the data supporting existing findings that social media is essential for trans-specific identity work and support. The differing conclusions and affective orientations participants drew from this disparity have fresh implications for the ways trans youth experience the online/AFK divide, or indeed, lack thereof.

The desire for agency over algorithms and generally less centralised control of platforms to empower t4t commoning practices in bottom-up managed spaces, shows an insight into technological issues, and a capacity for reimagining digital space to centre care and autonomy over capital, that trans youth are not given the space or credit to be able to voice in much existing work.

13.2 Implications

The data collected in this study have implications for a range of stakeholders, a summary of which is detailed below.

13.2.1 Universities and Researchers

Ethics

There is a need for evidence-based policies and procedures on digital methods that are flexible enough to be applicable to such a rapidly changing field, thereby avoiding the need to develop bespoke policies for each new digital method project. Another area which would benefit from proactive, evidence-based and nuanced ethics policies is parental consent in youth research. This is because there are many sensitive but vital areas of research for which requiring parental consent may increase risk to the young person, e.g. LGBT+, abortion, sexual health, etc., and a blanket rule of parental consent can impede research on these topics.

Methods

The time frame of data collection, February-August 2023, was a period of major shift in the digital landscape with the change in ownership of X (formerly Twitter) and several new major platforms being launched (Threads and Bluesky). Since then, X (formerly Twitter) and all Meta platforms have made many significant alterations (cuts) to their policies and staffing. This study had to contend with increasingly frequent technical issues with no service support during data collection. Combined with the wider context of enshittification described previously, it is arguable that when designing digital methods during times of unpredictability, researchers should integrate contingency plans and redundancies, e.g. seek ethical approval for 1st choice and 2nd choice data collection platforms from the beginning of a project. This is additional and potentially unnecessary labour but would provide insurance for projects against platforms suddenly altering or collapsing.

13.2.2 Platform designers and policymakers

Due to the theme of participants describing negative experiences which they ascribed to algorithms, a structural implication for platforms is that algorithms be altered to remove the asymmetry of information, and therefore power, from the human-algorithm

relationship. Transparency would remove the labour of developing folk theories about what algorithms will do and why. Additionally, being able to expressly veto certain types of content from being recommended by the algorithm regardless of other engagement signifiers would give users agency over their digital environments that would provide opportunities to avoid or interrupt negative vortextuality.

Another implication for platform design to come out of the data is the importance of granular privacy and safety features that can be trusted to stay consistent. Affordances such as this minimise the labour trans youth have to invest in managing the boundaries of their various contexts on social media and traversing between them.

A decentralised model of community-run moderation on platforms formed of smaller nodes appears to be the most manageable solution to the issue of tackling transphobic and other hateful content. However, large, centralised platforms are still of particular use for certain groups, such as self-employed creatives who need to promote their work, and trans people should not have to retreat from these spaces because they are difficult to moderate. Thus, for these platforms, trans-informed human moderation is vital to assess context and not further marginalise victims of online abuse.

As so many features of social media were experienced as deeply ambivalent in terms of benefits versus harms, platforms must consider how affordances can facilitate harm and how this can be minimised without compromising positive utility. Existing with other people will always come with some discomfort, and some ambivalence must be tolerated, e.g. it is important not to require real names, even though this may benefit trans-hostile posters, because it is also vital for trans youth to anonymously conduct identity work.

That retroactive privacy concerns were commonly expressed implies the importance of making it easy to download, archive and delete all historical posts and personal data from a platform. Such affordances have been referred to as “temporal privacy tools” in other literature (Zhang et al. 2023) and would assist in providing trans youth with the grace to experiment in their identity work and then exercise the right to be forgotten. This can never be completely assured, as any content that has spent some time in a public may have been copied and stored by others, but temporal privacy tools would minimise risk.

Participants described investing a lot of time and labour into their accounts on various platforms, investments that were put at risk when those platforms changed for the worse to the point of becoming untenable to remain using. This, plus the importance of the option to take networks from their public venue of formation to safer, more private spaces (e.g. Tumblr to Discord) provides stark examples of the network cost of the non-transferability across platforms as described by Doctorow (2024). Enabling low-cost transferability and removing punishments for digital migration would go against the logics of neo-liberal platform capitalism, and would thus require a commitment to the well-being of users above market domination (Doctorow, 2024).

13.2.3 Organisations and groups

A common theme was trans young people taking self-care breaks from social media but finding that this comes at the cost of finding out about community events AFK. This suggests that any organisation or group putting on events with trans youth as a part of the target demographic should consider providing ways to stay up to date with events that are not tied to a social media platform e.g. an email newsletter.

As fandom and secondary interests proved to be such important entry points to identity work and centre points for community building, youth organisations may consider organising LGBT+ safe spaces/events that are not LGBT+ exclusive to allow attendees the leeway to explore these opportunities without first having to commit to or come out as an LGBT+ identity.

In addition to the good practice of asking for consent before taking pictures when events happen, ongoing consent may be improved by ensuring that anyone featured in photographs or named in social media content can exercise their right to be forgotten. This implication emerged from the theme of anxiety about data longevity and retroactive privacy concerns developing as trans youth come to develop a greater sense of risk at being identified as trans.

Social media literacy education sessions that include resources about data collection, storage and longevity, as well as algorithm awareness, responses to online transphobia and general self-care tips for social media use may be particularly useful for younger

trans people. Education about the risks of social media should be delivered in a manner that is sensitive to the many, often vital, benefits of social media for trans youth.

13.2.4 Trans (young) people

Ideally social media would be safe enough for Trans youth to use without any special precautions or tactics, and recommendations for their behaviour when it is the hostility and transphobia of others that is at issue risks being perceived as victim blaming, or at the least putting the onus on those already most affected to make change. However, using the approach of trans existentialism from a depressed trans position requires responding to the diverse range of trans experience from a realist grounding in the day-to-day negativity of the mundane. From this understanding, data analysis leads to the following implications for trans youth/trans people in general for adapting their social media experience to make it as liveable and conducive to their flourishing as possible, as many participants were already doing.

Negative vortextuality

The data suggests that being mindful of the time spent scrolling, and the prominence of negative trans content within that, is only slightly useful in itself; to maximise the success of breaking out of negative vortextuality appears to require coupling awareness with strategies of removal. This could be through utilising technological affordances to limit scroll time, but this must be coupled with conscious redirection from an anxious dogpaddling orientation to “sink” out of the vortex successfully; otherwise, those still in a paranoid position are liable to override their self-imposed restrictions on scrolling. This redirection can take place online or AFK. AFK distractions, such as solo hobbies, may be useful for respite and rest. Those with access to readily available AFK support networks can use these both as a distraction and as an opportunity to reorient towards the affective value of those connections and devalue the hostility of strangers. Following the implication that organisations may assist trans youth in taking social media breaks by delivering information for AFK events via alternative routes, it may be useful for trans youth to establish their access to these alternative methods of staying up to date before they reach the point of feeling they need a break.

Breaking away from negative vortextuality whilst still online appears possible but requires the labour of careful boundary maintenance, such as accounts where

affordances such as muting, blocking and tagging, along with the less reliable tactic of training the algorithm, are utilised to curate positive and neutral content. Due to the identity-flattening qualities of algorithmically-driven feeds, this method may be most suitable for those who are content to substitute a negative vortex for a utopic vortex of content centred around a specific interest.

Non-vortextual online social media spaces, that is, those without endless algorithmically-driven feeds, may be useful digital bolt holes for breaks from deluge-style content and direct hostility. Walled gardens of varying levels of privacy and size, particularly ones that are for people with a shared demographic or interest, can be free of vortextuality but also come with their own downsides, such as overexposure to venting and reduced opportunities for intergroup solidarities. This implies walled gardens may be of significant usefulness for self-care and strengthening counterintimacy ties as part of multitooling with other types of social media space.

Privacy

To minimise the risk of retroactive privacy concerns, the data implies that trans youth may want to consider who is going to have their data and for how long whenever they set up a social media account and post content. This may be a good rule of thumb for everyone, but trans youth have the added considerations of whether they are sure they are always going to be comfortable being publicly out as trans, and if not, whether that information posted now is going to be possible to disassociate from in the future.

All participants utilised social media affordances to maintain multiple contexts e.g. different accounts, privacy settings, anonymity level, multitooling apps etc. This implies that trans youth do not need this recommendation, as they tend to be extremely savvy in managing their online presence. However, participants were all older than 16 years old and described many stressful and distressing experiences before developing their current strategies, so it may be a useful point of education for younger trans youth in order to avoid experiencing the same pitfalls.[40]

[40] It is also possible that the digital data collection method resulted in recruitment of only particularly tech savvy participants, in which case such digital context negotiation may be a more widely useful point of education.

Community

Venting online appears to be common and may be useful in private, diary-like spaces or walled-community spaces when receiving support is not time sensitive. However, trans young people would do well to develop crisis practices for times of acute distress that do not rely on posting on social media and hoping supportive people will be online to see it and respond promptly.

Contributing to trans commoning practices with labour can be personally enriching, *if* self-care is valued as much as care for the imagined others in the counterintimacy, that is, not continuing for the sake of others to their own detriment, as seen in doomscrolling and some counter-speech.

13.2.5 Carers and allies

It was clear from the data that online, trans youth notice the visible level of support trans people receive and this can have a profound emotional impact. Whilst counter-speech is appreciated, expressions of positivity and care to trans people directly, rather than amplifying transphobic content via conflict with it, will demonstrate support without further exposing trans people to vicarious transphobia.

Whilst trans youth found it helpful to take breaks from doomscrolling environments, carers and allies who may want to suggest this to a trans loved one should understand that it is not as simple as logging off, when all the benefits of online trans counterintimacy are also on social media. What may look like digital self-harm may actually be the pull of intimacy undertow, so rather than suggesting they take a break as an intervention on its own, it may be more helpful to include alternative ways to address the affective and counterintimacy needs that are otherwise drawing them into negative vortextuality.

Similarly to organisations, carers of younger trans people may want to provide resources for technological literacy that maximise safety and promote self-care. Whilst it may be tempting to dissuade social media use altogether, given the negatives explored in this data, the strongest theme in what trans youth wanted other people to understand about their social media use is that they need to be granted the grace to play and experiment with their identity online.

13.3 Limitations

A sample size of 17 was sufficient to establish themes for analysis from long-form qualitative data but a larger sample may have facilitated the emergence of more and stronger themes, and the potential for more granular demographic data. The demographics of the participants were varied in age, gender, sexuality and disability, but the sample was mostly white, lacked the youngest approved ages and had no one living in rural areas or anywhere outside of England. These perspectives may have provided different and significant insights.

The other major limitation was Google Groups, aside from the technical issues covered in the Method chapter, this platform is not as user-friendly (based on participant feedback) as less secure platforms. This, plus the labour of setting up, followed by a 3-day time investment, meant that all participants had to be highly motivated to take part. Therefore, a collection method that required less commitment and technological literacy may have resulted in more diverse attitudes and experiences in the data.

13.4 Future research

This project produced a variety of themes that suggest avenues for future research. As mentioned in limitations, multiply marginalised trans youth, particularly those who are racialised and/or rurally-based are likely to have specific experiences that warrant dedicated investigation.

The lack of younger participants (14-16 year olds) leaves questions as to whether they would show the relative lack of insight and resilience tactics suggested by this study's participants' reflections on the social media experiences of their younger selves. It would also be of interest to further study the relationship of the obligation to engage in eldering to physical age versus "trans age".

Further research focused on negative vortextuality and doomscrolling would be useful for asking whether there is something trans-specific about the observed pattern of negative vortextuality or whether this also seen in other counterintimacies that are the subject of a great deal of negative content e.g. queer more broadly, disabled, immigrant, climate protester etc.

Finally, the experience of trans people who are living stealth but also engaging with online trans counterintimacies was an unexpected aspect of the data and one that warrants further dedicated study, especially in the context of escalating hostility to trans people engaging in public life, as this may lead to this being an increasingly common experience.

References

Abbing, R. (2023). Decentralised social media. *Internet Policy Review*, *12*(1).

Adams, N., Pearce, R., Veale, J., Radix, A., Castro, D., Sarkar, A., & Thom, K. C. (2017). Guidance and ethical considerations for undertaking transgender health research and institutional review boards adjudicating this research. *Transgender health*, *2*(1), 165-175.

Ahmed, S. (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, London.

Ahmed, S. (2010a) *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, London.

Ahmed, S. (2010b). Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness. *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society*, *35*(3), 571-594.

Ahmed, S. (2025a, March 7th) Insistence on Relation Or how not to be pulled in by positivity. *Feministkilljoys.* Substack. https://feministkilljoys.substack.com/p/insistence-on-relation. Accessed 25.03.25.

Ahmed, S. (2025b, March 25th) Hounded! As a cover story (told by and about "gender critical" feminists). *Feministkilljoys.* Substack. https://feministkilljoys.substack.com/p/hounded. Accessed 25.03.25.

Airoldi, M. (2021) *Machine Habitus: towards a sociology of Algorithms*. Wiley.

Alderman, B. (2024). Polarization and the Algorithmic Undertow: Integral and Critical Realist Perspectives. *Journal of Conscious Evolution*, *21*(1), 3.

Alfonzo, P. (2021). A topology of twitter tactics: tracing the rhetorical dimensions and digital labor of networked publics. *Social Media+ Society*, *7*(2).

Amin, K. (2022). We are all nonbinary: A brief history of accidents. *Representations*, *158*(1), 106-119.

Amm, H. (2022) *Medicalizing Me Softly: An Autoethnography of Refusal.* MSc Thesis, Lund University, Department of Sociology. https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=9095692&fileOId=9095693. Accessed 04.01.24

Are, C., Talbot, C., & Briggs, P. (2024). Social media affordances of LGBTQIA+ expression and community formation. *Convergence*, 13548565241296628.

Ashley, F. (2023). What is it like to have a gender identity?. *Mind*, *132*(528), 1053-1073.

Ashley, F. (2020). A critical commentary on 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria'. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(4), 779-799.

Ashley, F. (2020a). Homophobia, conversion therapy, and care models for trans youth: defending the gender-affirmative approach. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *17*(4), 361-383.

Ashley, F. (2020b). Accounting for research fatigue in research ethics. *Bioethics*, *35*(3), 270-276.

Ashman, R., Patterson, A., & Brown, S. (2018). 'Don't forget to like, share and subscribe': Digital autopreneurs in a neoliberal world. *Journal of Business Research*, 92, 474-483.

Associated Press (2015, April 29th). Transgender teenager Leelah Alcorn's death in Ohio was suicide, officials say. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/apr/29/trangender-teenager-leelah-alcorn-ohio-suicide. Accessed 20.06.2022.

Awkward-Rich, C. (2022). *The terrible we: Thinking with trans maladjustment*. Duke University Press.

Awkward-Rich, C. & Malatino, H. (2022). Meanwhile, t4t. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*. 9(1), 1-8.

Baider, F. (2023). Accountability Issues, Online Covert Hate Speech, and the Efficacy of Counter-Speech*. Politics and Governance*, 11(2), 249-260.

Bailey, M., & Trudy. (2018). On misogynoir: Citation, erasure, and plagiarism. *Feminist Media Studies*, *18*(4), 762-768.

Baker, P. (2019). *Comparison of the coverage of stories about trans people in 2012 and 2018-19*. Mermaids. https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/news/exclusive-mermaids-research-into-newspaper-coverage-on-trans-issues/ Accessed 05.02.25.

Baker, S. (2023, September 28th). Cancel culture? Trans-inclusive writers say they face abuse and censorship. *Open Democracy.* https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/anti-trans-views-academia-kathleen-stock-sussex-university/ Accessed 25.03.25.

Banks, M. (2018). *Using visual data in qualitative research.* (Vol. 5). Sage.

Bannerman, L. (2022) 1st October. "Trans charity's chatroom for children condemned as irresponsible free for all", *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trans-charitys-chatroom-for-children-condemned-as-irresponsible-free-for-all-hwgzvdhzj. Accessed 02.01.22.

Barassi, V. (2015). Social media, immediacy and the time for democracy. *Critical perspectives on social media and protest: between control and emancipation. London: Rowman & Littlefield*, 73-90.

Barcelos, C. A., & Budge, S. L. (2019). Inequalities in crowdfunding for transgender health care. *Transgender health*, *4*(1), 81-88.

Barnett, J. T. (2015). Social Media: Fleshy Metamorphosis: Temporal Pedagogies of Transsexual Counterpublics. *Transgender communication studies*, 155-172.

Bates, A., Hobman, T., & Bell, B. T. (2020). "Let Me Do What I Please With It... Don't Decide My Identity For Me": LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences of Social Media in Narrative Identity Development. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *35*(1), 51-83.

Banfield-Nwachi, M. (2023, Oct 13th). NHS gender care delays 'contributed' to trans woman killing herself, coroner says. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/oct/13/nhs-gender-care-delays-contributed-to-trans-woman-killing-herself-coroner-says. Accessed 05.02.25.

Bell vs Tavistock, EWHC 3274 (High Court of Justice 1st December 2020). https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Bell-v-Tavistock-Judgment.pdf. Accessed 18.02.25.

Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim code*. John Wiley & Sons.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Book.

Berlant, L. (1998) 'Intimacy: A special Issue', *Critical inquiry* 24(2): 281–288.

Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical inquiry*, *24*(2), 547-566.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press, London.

Berlant, L. (2022) *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. Durham, NC: Duke University

Press.

Bhanji, N. N. (2018). *Trans Necrointimacies: Affect, Race, and the Chalky Geopolitics of Trans Memorialization.* Doctoral Thesis. York University, Toronto, Ontario.

Bhuiyan, J. (2024, November 15th). Companies building AI-powered tech are using your posts. Here's how to opt out. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/nov/15/x-ai-gmail-meta-privacy-settings. Accessed 08.05.25.

Billson, C. (2024, Jul 30th). Man charged with attempted murder after trans teenager stabbed in Southport. *Pink News.* https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/07/30/southport-trans-teenager-stabbing/. Accessed 05.02.25.

Birch, K. (2023). Data Paradoxes. *Data Enclaves*, pp. 107-124. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Bishop, S. (2019). Managing visibility on YouTube through algorithmic gossip. *New media & society*, *21*(11-12), 2589-2606.

Bolin, A. E. (1983). *In search of Eve: Transsexual rites of passage.* University of Colorado at Boulder.

Booth, R. (2025, January 8th). Revisions of 'hateful conduct': what users can now say on Meta platforms. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/08/permitted-hateful-conduct-what-users-can-now-say-on-meta-platforms. Accessed 08.03.25.

Borck, C. R., & Moore, L. J. (2019). This is my voice on T: Synthetic testosterone, DIY surveillance, and transnormative masculinity. *Surveillance & Society*, *17*(5), 631-640.

Bost, M. W., & Hanan, J. S. (2023). Intimacies of the Common: Enclosure, Solidarity, and the Possibilities of Critical Publicity under Capitalism. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *53*(3), 392-404.

Boyd, D. M. (2011). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In: Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites (*pp. 39–58). New York: Routledge.

Boyd, R. (2024, December 11th). From X to Bluesky: why are people fleeing Elon Musk's 'digital town square'? *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/dec/11/from-x-to-bluesky-why-are-people-abandoning-twitter-digital-town-square#:~:text=A%20mass%20departure%20from%20Elon,million%20over%20the%20same%20period. Accessed 07.04.25.

Bradford, N. J., & Syed, M. (2019). Transnormativity and transgender identity development: A master narrative approach. *Sex Roles*, *81*(5), 306-325.

Bradley, C. (2020) *Transphobic Hate Crime Report 2020: The Scale and Impact of transphobic violence, abuse and prejudice*. Galop. https://galop.org.uk/resource/transphobic-hate-crime-report-2020/. Accessed 22.11.2021.

Bradlow, J., Bartram, F., Guasp, A., & Jadva, V. (2017). *School report: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bi and trans young people in Britain's schools in 2017*. London: Stonewall.

Bradshaw, T. K. (2008). The post-place community: Contributions to the debate about the definition of community. *Community development*, *39*(1), 5-16.

Brandwatch, & Ditch The Label. (2019). *Exposed: The scale of transphobia online*. https://www. brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia. Accessed 14.06.22.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Breland, A. (2023). The website that wants you to kill yourself- and won't die. *Mother Jones*. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/02/kiwi-farms-die-drop-cloudflare-chandler-trolls/. Accessed 12.09.23.

Breslow, J. (2021). They would have transitioned me: third conditional TERF grammar of trans childhood. *Feminist Theory*, 14647001211046442.

Brightwell, L. (2017). The exclusionary effects of queer anti-normativity on feminine-identified queers. *Feral Feminisms*, *7*, 15-24.

Brinkman, L., & Francot, R. (2022). Developing a resilient sexual and gender minority identity online: The importance of social media for youth before coming out. In *LGBT+ Communities-Creating Spaces of Identity*. IntechOpen.

Brown, A. (2021, January 30th) Sophie, innovative producer and musician and trans icon, dies at 34. *The Los Angeles Times.* https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-01-30/sophie-grammy-nominated-scottish-musician-dies-at-age-34. Accessed 24.06.25.

Brown, M. (2025, March 23rd) Brianna Ghey's mother calls for social media ban for under-16s. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/mar/23/brianna-ghey-mother-esther-calls-for-social-media-ban-for-the-under-16s. Accessed 06.05.25.

Burgess, J. (2021). Platform studies. *Creator culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment*, 21-38.

Bush, S. (2024, January 9th). Substack gave the wrong reply to its' Nazi problem'. Opinion Technology. *The Financial Times.* https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA778730538&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=03071766&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7Eada9a0be&aty=open-web-entry. Accessed 06.05.25.

Buss, J., Le, H., & Haimson, O. L. (2022). Transgender identity management across social media platforms. *Media, Culture & Society*, *44*(1), 22-38

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of ''sex.''*. New York, NY: Routledge.
Butler, J. (2024). *Who's afraid of gender?*. Random House.
Carrell, S. (2025, April 16th) Legal definition of woman is based on biological sex, UK supreme court rules. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/apr/16/critics-of-trans-rights-win-uk-supreme-court-case-over-definition-of-woman. Accessed 09.06.25.

Carroll, M.D., Dragan, A., Russell, S. & Hadfield-Menell, D. (2022). Estimating and Penalizing Induced Preference Shifts in Recommender Systems. *Proceedings of the 39th International Conference on Machine Learning, in Proceedings of Machine Learning Research,* 162:2686-2708. Available from https://proceedings.mlr.press/v162/carroll22a.html.

Cavalcante, A. (2020). Tumbling into queer utopias and vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ social media users on Tumblr. In *LGBTQ Culture* (pp. 77-97). Routledge.

Chayka, K. (2024). *Filterworld: How algorithms flattened culture*. Random House.

Cho, A. (2018). Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine. *New Media & Society*, *20*(9), 3183-3200.

Church, E. M., Thambusamy, R., & Nemati, H. (2017). Privacy and pleasure: A paradox of the hedonic use of computer-mediated social networks. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *77*, 121-131.

Chun, W. H. K. (2016). *Updating to remain the same: Habitual new media*. MIT press.

Claeys, M. (2024). Just Asking! On “Friendly” Forms of Harassment. *Hypatia*, 1-16.

Colbert, S. (2017). Chapter One: Like Trapdoors. In Knox, E.J.M. (ed), *Trigger Warnings: History, Theory, Context*. Rowman & Littlefield: London. 3-21.

Collins, P.H. (1986) Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. *Social Problems* 33(6): S14–S32.

Conrad, R., & Pelletier, G. L. (2022). Here, Queer, and Paranoid! On Acrid Sociality and Collaborating Otherwise. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *9*(2), 69-92.

Corry, F. (2021). Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame. *First Monday*.

Cotter, K. (2024). Practical knowledge of algorithms: The case of BreadTube. *New Media & Society*, *26*(4), 2131-2150.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The mediated construction of reality*. John Wiley & Sons.

Colapinto, John (2001). *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*. New York: Harper Perennial. pp. 86–88.

Craig, S. L., & McInroy, L. (2014). You can form a part of yourself online: The influence of new media on identity development and coming out for LGBTQ youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, *18*(1), 95-109.

Crawford, L. C. (2008). Transgender without organs? Mobilizing a geo-affective theory of gender modification. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *36*(3/4), 127-143.

Cronesberry, K., & Ward, L. (2024). Exploring gender diverse young adults' gender identity development in online LGBTQIA+ communities. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1-13.

Cross, K. (2024) *Log Off: Why Posting and Politics (Almost) Never Mix.* Little Puss Press.

Cross, K. (2019). Toward a formal sociology of online harassment. *Human Technology*, *15*(3), 326-346.

Cross, K. A. (2014). Ethics for cyborgs: On real harassment in an "unreal" place. *Loading...*, *8*(13).

Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social science information*, *45*(4), 483-499.

Curth, W., & Mayeux, L. (2024). The unique roles of family, friend, and online support in the psychological adjustment of transgender young adults. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1-16.

Cuthbertson, A. (2024, September 24th). Elon Musk removes X block button as users fear return of 'creeps'. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/x-block-button-elon-musk-b2617880.html. Accessed 30.03.25.

Cvetkovich, A. (1992). *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism.* Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.

Cvetkovich, A. (2012). *Depression: a public feeling*. London: Duke University Press.

Dame-Griff, A. (2023) *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet.* NYU Press

Davidovic, A., Talbot, C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., & Joinson, A. (2023). To intervene or not to intervene: young adults' views on when and how to intervene in online harassment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *28*(5), zmad027.

Davis, P. G. (2020). Spatiality at the cyber-margins: Black-oriented blogs and the production of territoriality online. *Social Media+ Society*, *6*(2), 2056305120928506.

Dawson, P. (2020). Hashtag narrative: Emergent storytelling and affective publics in the digital age. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *23*(6), 968-983.

Dean, J. (2003). Why the Net is not a Public Sphere. *Constellations*, *10*(1), 95-112.

Department of Education (2023, December). *Gender Questioning Children: Non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England. Draft for consultation.* https://consult.education.gov.uk/equalities-political-impartiality-anti-bullying-team/gender-questioning-children-proposed-guidance/supporting_documents/Gender%20Questioning%20Children%20%20nonstatutory%20guidance.pdf. Accessed 07.02.25.

Department of Health and Social Care (2024, December). *Ban on puberty blockers to be made indefinite on experts' advice* [press release]. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ban-on-puberty-blockers-to-be-made-indefinite-on-experts-advice. Accessed 05.03.25.

DeVito, M. A. (2022). How transfeminine TikTok creators navigate the algorithmic trap of visibility via folk theorization. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *6*(CSCW2), 1-31.

Digital Transgender Archive. *Collections: Transgender Tapestry.* https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/col/7w62f824d. Accessed 16.06.22.

Digital Youth Index (2023) *Digital Youth Index: Report 2023*. Nominet Social Impact. https://digitalyouthindex.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Digital-Youth-Index-2023-report.pdf. Accessed 07.04.25.

DiFranco, R. (2020). I wrote this paper for the Lulz: The ethics of internet trolling. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *23*, 931-945.

Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. & Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A.S Dobson, B. Robards & N. Carah (Eds.) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. New York: Palgrave.

Doctorow, C. (2024) *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation*. London: Verso.

Doctorow, C. (2023, 3rd January). The 'Enshittification' of TikTok. *Wired Magazine*. https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/. Accessed 02.12.24.

Doherty, S. (2020, June 3rd) Inside Operation Pridefall: 4chan's Attempt to Bring Down Pride 2020. Vice. https://www.vice.com/en/article/operation-pridefall-4chan-gay-pride-2020/ Accessed 05.05.25.

Döş, B. (2017). Using Asynchronous Discussion Groups To Support Teaching In Higher Education. *Distance Learning, Simulation and Communication*, 41.

Duckitt, J. & Sibley, C.G. (2007). Right wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and the dimensions of generalized prejudice. *European Journal of Personality: Published for the European Association of Personality Psychology*, 21(2), 113–130.

Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., Murkin, G., Benson, R., Hesketh, R., Page, B., Skinner, G., & Gottfried, G. (2021). *Culture wars in the UK: how the public understand the debate*. KCL. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk-how-the-public-understand-the-debate.pdf Accessed 23.05.24.

Duffy, B. E., & Meisner, C. (2023). Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in) visibility. *Media, Culture & Society*, *45*(2), 285-304.

Earnshaw, V. A., Menino, D. D., Sava, L. M., Perrotti, J., Barnes, T. N., Humphrey, D. L., & Reisner, S. L. (2020). LGBTQ bullying: A qualitative investigation of student and school health professional perspectives. *Journal of LGBT youth*, *17*(3), 280-297.

Edwards, E. J., & Boellstorff, T. (2021). Migration, non-use, and the 'Tumblrpocalypse': Towards a unified theory of digital exodus. *Media, Culture & Society*, *43*(3), 582-592.

Equidem (2025). *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderation and Data Labelling.* Equidem, London. https://equidem.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Equidem-Data-Workers-Report-May-29.pdf. Accessed 27.06.25.

Erlick, E. (2018). Trans youth activism on the internet. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *39*(1), 73-92.

Ernst, M. (2001). Living in the Shadow of the World Wide Web: Lesser Known Network Resources. *Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values*. 1(3).

Evans, H. (2025, January 15th). Teenager stabbed in transphobic attack by gang of youths outside Harrow roller blades disco. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/transgender-attack-harrow-leisure-centre-old-bailey-b2680201.html. Accessed 05.02.25.

Feinberg, L. (2013). Transgender liberation: A movement whose time has come. *The transgender studies reader*. Routledge. 205-220.

Fiaccadori, E. (2006). The Question of 'Nature': What has Social Constructionism to offer Feminist Theory?. *Sociology Working Papers*, 1-17.

FiveforFive (2022) https://www.fiveforfive.co.uk. Accessed 17.06.22.

Figlerowicz, M. (2012). Affect theory dossier: An introduction. *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, *20*(2), 3-18.

Flick, U. (2004). Constructivism. In Flick, U., Kardorff, E. v. & Steinke, I. (eds), *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. 88–94.

Fonseca, S. (2021). The Constitutional Conflationists: On Abigail Shrier's "Irreversible Damage" and the Dangerous Absurdity of Anti-Trans Trolls. *Los Angeles Review of Books.* https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-constitutional-conflationists-on-abigail-shriers-irreversible-damage-and-the-dangerous-absurdity-of-anti-trans-trolls/. Accessed 19.01.2021.

Formby, E. (2017). *Exploring LGBT spaces and communities: Contrasting identities, belongings and wellbeing*. Taylor & Francis.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text,* 25/26, 56-80. Duke University Press.

Freeman, G., & Acena, D. (2022). " Acting Out" Queer Identity: The Embodied Visibility in Social Virtual Reality. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *6*(CSCW2), 1-32.

Fritz, N., & Gonzales, A. (2018). Privacy at the Margins| not the normal trans story: negotiating trans narratives while crowdfunding at the margins. *International Journal of Communication*, *12*, 20.

Fritz, R. L., & Vandermause, R. (2018). Data collection via in-depth email interviewing: Lessons from the field. *Qualitative health research*, *28*(10), 1640-1649.

Galpin, C. (2022). At the digital margins? A theoretical examination of social media engagement using intersectional feminism. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(1), 161-171.

Gani, J. K., & Khan, R. M. (2024). Positionality statements as a function of coloniality: Interrogating reflexive methodologies. *International Studies Quarterly*, *68*(2), sqae038.

Gill-Peterson, J. (2018). *Histories of the transgender child*. U of Minnesota Press.

Gill-Peterson, J. (2024). *A short history of trans misogyny*. Verso Books.

GLSEN (2013). *Out online: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth on the Internet*. New York, NY. https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Out_Online_Full_Report_2013.pdf. Accessed 26.10.22.

Godderis, R., & Root, J. L. (2016). Trigger warnings: Compassion is not censorship. *Radical Pedagogy*, *13*(2), 130-8.

Goldberg, A. E., & Beemyn, G. (Eds.). (2021). Introduction. *The SAGE encyclopedia of trans studies*. Sage Publications, xxv-xxvii.

Good Law Project (2024, June 21st). The shocking rise of deaths among young trans people. *Latest.* https://goodlawproject.org/rise-of-deaths-young-trans-people/. Accessed 08.05.25.

Gordon, A. R., Calzo, J. P., Eiduson, R., Sharp, K., Silverstein, S., Lopez, E., Thomson, K. & Reisner, S. L. (2021). Asynchronous online focus groups for health research: Case study and lessons learned. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20*, 160940692199048. doi:10.1177/1609406921990489

Gossett, R., Stanley, E.A. & Burton, J. (2017) “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door.” *Trap door: Trans cultural production and the politics of visibility*, Reina Gossett, Eric A Stanley and Johanna Burton (ed.). MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, xv-xxvi.

Gray, M. (2009). *Out in the country*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Gridley, S. J., Crouch, J. M., Evans, Y., Eng, W., Antoon, E., Lyapustina, M., ... & Breland, D. J. (2016). Youth and caregiver perspectives on barriers to gender-affirming health care for transgender youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *59*(3), 254-261.

Grove, J. (2024, June 19th). ‘Unethical’: ministers sit on LGBTQ research for five years. *Times Higher Education.* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/unethical-ministers-sit-lgbtq-research-five-years. Accessed 07.02.25.

Guyan, K. (2022). *Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex and Sexuality Data for Action*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Habermas, J. (1962). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT press.

Haimson, O. L., Brubaker, J. R., Dombrowski, L., & Hayes, G. R. (2015, February). Disclosure, stress, and support during gender transition on Facebook. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM conference on computer supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 1176-1190).

Haimson, O. L., & Hoffmann, A. L. (2016). Constructing and enforcing" authentic" identity online: Facebook, real names, and non-normative identities. *First Monday*.

Haimson, O. (2018). Social media as social transition machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *2*(CSCW), 1-21.

Haimson, O. L., Buss, J., Weinger, Z., Starks, D. L., Gorrell, D., & Baron, B. S. (2020). Trans time: Safety, privacy, and content warnings on a transgender-specific social media site. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *4*(CSCW2), 1-27.

Haimson, O. L., Dame-Griff, A., Capello, E., & Richter, Z. (2021). Tumblr was a trans technology: the meaning, importance, history, and future of trans technologies. *Feminist media studies*, *21*(3), 345-361.

Haimson, O. L., Delmonaco, D., Nie, P., & Wegner, A. (2021a). Disproportionate removals and differing content moderation experiences for conservative, transgender, and black social media users: Marginalization and moderation gray areas. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *5*(CSCW2), 1-35.

Halberstam, J. (2005) *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York University Press.

Hanckel, B., Vivienne, S., Byron, P., Robards, B., & Churchill, B. (2019). 'That's not necessarily for them': LGBTIQ+ young people, social media platform affordances and identity curation. *Media, Culture & Society*, *41*(8), 1261-1278.

Haulotte, P. (2023). Program for a Transgender Existentialism. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *10*(1), 32-41.

Hayward, E. (2024, December 17th). MPs wrong to claim puberty blockers ban is discrimination, Cass says. *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.com/uk/healthcare/article/hilary-cass-puberty-blocker-ban-misinformation-2dc36vpd5. Accessed 08.05.25.

Hayward, E. (2025, April 27th). NHS to test all children who identify as transgender for autism. *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/nhs-to-test-all-children-who-identify-as-transgender-for-autism-t2vpv5mh8. Accessed 08.05.25.

Heggestad, J. (2021). Paranoid viewers and the 'already knowing' of YouTube's coming out genre. *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, *6*(2), 105-122.

Helwer, A. (2023, March 8th) Google Groups has been left to die: where should the formal methods community move? *Andrew Helwer*. https://ahelwer.ca/post/2023-03-08-google-groups/. Accessed 07.07.24.

Hern, A. (2021, September 2nd). UK children's digital privacy code comes into effect. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/02/uk-childrens-digital-privacy-code-comes-into-effect. Accessed 05.10.22.

Herley, B. (2022, 13th June). Proud Boys crash 'Drag Queen Story Hour' for kindergartners at library, sparking hate crime probe. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/proud-boys-drag-queen-story-hour-hate-crime-b2099314.html. Accessed 24.06.22.

Herrmann, L., Bindt, C., Hohmann, S., & Becker-Hebly, I. (2024). Social media use and experiences among transgender and gender diverse adolescents. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *25*(1), 36-49.

Hiebert, A., & Kortes-Miller, K. (2021). Finding home in online community: exploring TikTok as a support for gender and sexual minority youth throughout COVID-19. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 1-18.

Hines, S. (2020). Sex wars and (trans) gender panics: Identity and body politics in contemporary UK feminism. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(4), 699-717.

Hobbs, A. (2021). *Substack and the Newsletter Boom: When Does a Platform Become a Publisher?*. SAGE Publications: SAGE Business Cases Originals.

Home Office (2024). *Official Statistics: Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024. Accessed 06.02.25.

Horak, L. (2014). Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, visibility, temporality. Transgender Studies Quarterly, 1(4), 572–585.

Horton, C. (2024). The Cass Review: Cis-supremacy in the UK's approach to healthcare for trans children. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1-25.

Horton, C. (2024a). The importance of child voice in trans health research: a critical review of research on social transition and well-being in trans children. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *25*(3), 389-406.

Hossein-Pour, A. & Dale, B. (2024, April 12th). Teenager died because of care failures, jury says. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cv2900vkpd5o. Accessed 05.02.25.

House of Commons Library (2024, Feb 22nd). *Research briefing: Prohibiting conversion therapy.* https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9972/CBP-9972.pdf Accessed 07.02.25.

Humphrey, R., Easpaig, B. N. G., & Fox, R. (2019). Co-producing trans ethical research. In *The Emergence of Trans*(pp. 165-178). Routledge.

Hunte, B. (2022, February 22nd) "Guidance Supporting Trans Kids Scrapped by EHRC After Government Interference." *Vice*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5q8am/ehrc-trans-students-guidance-scrapped. Accessed 23.02.22.

Hunte, B. (2023, February 14th) **'**We're Her Trans Sisters': Friends Pay Tribute to Stabbing Victim Brianna Ghey. *Vice*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/brianna-ghey-killing/. Accessed 06.05.25.

Ibrahim, D. Y., Lopes, A. S., & Borges, G. L. (2021). The Use of Google Groups in a Collaborative Environment. *International Journal of Open Information Technologies*, 9(11), 90-96.

Jaaksi, V. (2025). "I made myself a new safety bubble": Building trans virtual homeplaces. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13678779251322782.

Jackson, S.J. & Foucault Welles, B. (2015) Hijacking# myNYPD: social media dissent and net- worked counterpublics. *Journal of Communication* 65(6): 932–952

Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2018). # GirlsLikeUs: Trans advocacy and community building online. *New Media & Society*, *20*(5), 1868-1888.

Jackson, K., and Bazeley, P. (2019). Qualitative Data Analysis With NVivo, 3rd Edn. London: Sage Publications.

Jacobsen, K., Devor, A., & Hodge, E. (2022). Who counts as trans? A critical discourse analysis of trans Tumblr posts. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *46*(1), 60-81.

James, W. (1890). The Principles of Psychology. New York, NY: Holt.

Jennings, P. E. (2023). *Entertainment, education, empowerment: The role of TikTok in gender diverse lesbian identity negotiation* (Order No. 30873093). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2890140582).

Jenzen, O. (2017) Trans youth and social media: moving between counterpublics and the wider web. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *24*(11), 1626-1641.

Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2014). Talk is cheap: Ethnography and the attitudinal fallacy. *Sociological methods & research*, *43*(2), 178-209.

Jiang, Jialun Aaron, Charles Kiene, Skyler Middler, Jed R. Brubaker, and Casey Fiesler. (2019) Moderation challenges in voice-based online communities on discord.*Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, no. CSCW, 1-23.

Johns, M. M., Beltran, O., Armstrong, H. L., Jayne, P. E., & Barrios, L. C. (2018). Protective factors among transgender and gender variant youth: A systematic review by socioecological level. *The journal of primary prevention*, *39*, 263-301.

Johnson, A. H. (2015) Normative Accountability: How the Medical Model Influences Transgender Identities and Experiences. *Sociology Compass,* 9(9): 803–13.

Johnson, A. H. (2016). Transnormativity: A new concept and its validation through documentary film about transgender men. *Sociological inquiry*, *86*(4), 465-491.

Johnson, J. C. (2022). Paranoid posting: an analysis of being too online. *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society*, *50*(2), 16-17.

Jolley, D., Paterson, J. L., Deric, D., Lovato, T., & McCarthy, J. (2025). Exploring how parasocial intergroup contact with transgender influencers on TikTok reduces transgender conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *35*(1), e70020.

Jones, A. (2021). Trans Theory and Gender Identity in Education. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.

Kaplan, A. M., and M. Haenlein. (2010) Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons* 53(1), 59–68.

Karamshuk, D., Shaw, F., Brownlie, J., & Sastry, N. (2017). Bridging big data and qualitative methods in the social sciences: A case study of Twitter responses to high profile deaths by suicide. *Online Social Networks and Media*, *1*, 33-43

Karim, S., Choukas-Bradley, S., Radovic, A., Roberts, S. R., Maheux, A. J., & Escobar-Viera, C. G. (2022). Support over social media among socially isolated sexual and gender minority youth in rural US during the COVID-19 pandemic: opportunities for intervention research. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(23), 15611.

Karizat, N., Delmonaco, D., Eslami, M., & Andalibi, N. (2021). Algorithmic folk theories and identity: How TikTok users co-produce knowledge of identity and engage in algorithmic resistance. *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction*, *5*(CSCW2), 1-44.

Katz, M. L., & Shapiro, C. (1985). Network externalities, competition, and compatibility. *The American economic review*, *75*(3), 424-440.

Kaufman, A. (2023, June 4th). The survival of Elliot Page. *The LA Times.* https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-06-04/for-real-elliot-page-survival-pageboy-umbrella-academy?fbclid=PAAabljJY_1EyODzdtcVyY1yInSjCyaUnCOw6H9VnaHpXRn_3tEZ_fBtSa5w4. Accessed 19.03.25.

Kelleher, J.D. (2019). *Deep Learning*. MIT Press.

Kelleher, P. (2022, 3rd June). 'Gender critical' author Helen Joyce says she wants to 'reduce' number of trans people: 'Chilling". *Pink News.* https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/06/03/helen-joyce-transgender-lgbtq/. Accessed 18.02.25.

Kender, K., & Spiel, K. (2025, April). Social Media as Marginalisation Machine: The Trans Desire for Solidarity Spaces. In *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-17).

Kennedy, N. (2018). Prisoners of Lexicon: cultural cisgenderism and transgender children. *Normed children: Effects of gender and sex related normativity on childhood and adolescence*, 297-312.

Kennedy, N. (2021). Agentic learning: the pedagogical implications of young trans people's online learning strategies. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *29*(5), 733-752.

Kenway, J., & McLeod*, J. (2004). Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and 'spaces of points of view': whose reflexivity, which perspective?. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *25*(4), 525-544.

Kirk, M., (2022). Trans Eldership: an exploration of intergenerational connections among trans people [Masters' Thesis, Sheffield Hallam University]

Klug, D., Qin, Y., Evans, M., & Kaufman, G. (2021, June). Trick and please. A mixed-method study on user assumptions about the TikTok algorithm. In *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021*. 84-92.

Knoblauch, H., & Pfadenhauer, M. (2023). Construction versus Realism? The Unrealized Potential of Communicative Constructivism. *Sociologica*, *17*(1), 119-136.

Konemann, L. (2021). *The Appendix: Transmasculine joy in a transphobic culture.* 404 ink.

Konnelly, L. (2023). Transmedicalisms, transnormativities, and semantic authority. *Linguistics Out of the Closet: The Interdisciplinarity of Gender and Sexuality in Language Science*, *3*, 169.

Koutropoulos, A., Stewart, B., Singh, L., Sinfield, S., Burns, T., Abegglen, S., ... & Bozkurt, A. (2024). Lines of Flight: The Digital Fragmenting of Educational Networks. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, *2024*(1), 1.

Kowert, R., & Cook, C. (2022). The toxicity of our (virtual) cities: prevalence of dark participation in games and perceived effectiveness of reporting tools. In *Proceedings of the 55th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.*

Lavery, G. (2023) "Gender Criticism Versus Gender Abolition: On Three Recent Books About Gender" *LA Review of Books.* https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/gender-criticism-versus-gender-abolition-on-three-recent-books-about-gender/. Accessed 01.08.23.

Lamble, S. (2024). Confronting complex alliances: Situating Britain's gender critical politics within the wider transnational anti-gender movement. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 1-14.

Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. (2014). Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative sociology*, *37*, 153-171.

Ledwich, M., Zaitsev, A., & Laukemper, A. (2022). Radical bubbles on YouTube? Revisiting algorithmic extremism with personalised recommendations. *First Monday*.

Lee, C. J. G. (2012). Reconsidering constructivism in qualitative research. *Educational Philosophy and theory*, *44*(4), 403-412.

Lee, C. (2023, Dec 19th). Trans guidance for schools: the voices of young people are missing. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/trans-guidance-for-schools-the-voices-of-young-people-are-missing-207663. Accessed 10.02.25.

Lee, R. (2024, August 23rd) Here today, Elon tomorrow: are advertisers abandoning X? *TechInformed*. https://techinformed.com/why-advertisers-are-boycotting-x-elon-musk-impact-2024/. Accessed 07.04.25.

Lerner, A., He, H. Y., Kawakami, A., Zeamer, S. C., & Hoyle, R. (2020, April). Privacy and activism in the transgender community. In *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-13).

Lewis, S., & Seresin, A. (2022). Fascist feminism: A dialogue. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *9*(3), 463-479.

Lewis, S. (2024) “TERF Island”. *Lux,* 11/12. https://lux-magazine.com/article/terf-island/ Accessed 23.10.24.

Links, M. (2022, March 26th). Increase in open calls for violence against trans people and allies. *Trans Safety Network*. https://transsafety.network/posts/violent-ideation/. Accessed 24.06.22.

Lobe, B., Morgan, D., & Hoffman, K. A. (2020). Qualitative data collection in an era of social distancing. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *19*, 1609406920937875.

LoMonte, F. D., & Leibert, S. J. (2023). Internet Famous: Are Online Influencers and Micro-Celebrities Public Figures Under Defamation Law?. *Mo. L. Rev.*, *88*, 715.

Lorenz, T., Dwoskin, E. & Jamison, P. (2022, 2nd September). Twitter account Libs of TikTok blamed for harassment of children’s hospitals. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/09/02/lgbtq-threats-hospitals-libs-of-tiktok/. Accessed 12.09.23.

Love, H. (2010). Truth and consequences: On paranoid reading and reparative reading. *Criticism*, *52*(2), 235-241.

Lovelock, M. (2017). ‘Is every YouTuber going to make a coming out video eventually?’: YouTube celebrity video bloggers and lesbian and gay identity. *Celebrity studies*, *8*(1), 87-103.

Low, B., Ehret, C., & Hagh, A. (2025). Algorithmic imaginings and critical digital literacy on# BookTok. *New Media & Society*, *27*(4), 2336-2353.

Lu, C., & Jurgens, D. (2022, July). The subtle language of exclusion: Identifying the Toxic Speech of Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminists. In *Proceedings of the sixth workshop on online abuse and harms (WOAH)* (pp. 79-91).

Lu, C. (2023). The algorithmic internet: Culture capture corruption.

Lünenborg, M. (2019). Affective publics. In *Affective societies*. Routledge. pp. 319-329.

Lupinacci, L. (2021). ‘Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing’: liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media. *Media, Culture & Society*, *43*(2), 273-290.

Macdonald, K. (2024, March 8th). It’s 10 years since Gamergate – the industry must now stand up to far-right trolls. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/games/2024/mar/08/gamergate-trolls-woke-game-consultants. Accessed 17.03.25.

Majewska, E. (2021) *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common.* Verso Books.

Malatino, H. (2022). *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*. U of Minnesota Press.

Maple Cocaine [@maplecocaine] (2019, January 3rd). Each day on twitter there is one main character. The goal is to never be it. [Post] X. https://x.com/maplecocaine/status/1080665226410889217

Marvin, A. (2022). Short-Circuited Trans Care, t4t, and Trans Scenes. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9(1), 9-27.

Marwick, A. E. (2021). Morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement. *Social Media+ Society*, *7*(2), 20563051211021378.

Marzetti, H., McDaid, L., & O'Connor, R. (2022). “Am I really alive?”: Understanding the role of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in young LGBT+ people's suicidal distress. *Social Science & Medicine*, *298*, 114860.

Mason, M. (2010, August). Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. In *Forum qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: qualitative social research* (Vol. 11, No. 3).

Matamoros Fernandez, A. (2018). Inciting anger through Facebook reactions in Belgium: The use of emoji and related vernacular expressions in racist discourse. *First Monday*, *23*(9).

May, T. (1999). Reflexivity and sociological practice. *Sociological Research Online*, *4*(3), 184-192.

Mayworm, S., DeVito, M. A., Delmonaco, D., Thach, H., & Haimson, O. L. (2024). Content moderation folk theories and perceptions of platform spirit among marginalized social media users. *ACM Transactions on Social Computing*, *7*(1-4), 1-27.

McConnell, E., Néray, B., Hogan, B., Korpak, A., Clifford, A., & Birkett, M. (2018). “Everybody puts their whole life on Facebook”: Identity Management and the online social networks of LGBTQ youth. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *15*(6), 1078.

McDonald, M. (2006) An Other Space:Between and Beyond Lesbian-Normativity and Trans-Normativity. *Journal of Lesbian Studies,* 10(1–2) :201–14.

McGuiness, A. (2018) *Facebook-mediated social support in the transgender community: a thematic analysis of user experiences.* Dissertation, Manchester Metropolitan University.

McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2020). “It’s like a safe haven fantasy world”: Online fandom communities and the identity development activities of sexual and gender minority youth. *Psychology of Popular Media*, *9*(2), 236.

Meezan, W., & Martin, J. L. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations (1st ed*.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Meyrowitz, J. (1986). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford University Press.

Milan, S. (2015). Mobilizing in times of social media. From a politics of identity to a politics of visibility. *In Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest,* edited by Dencik and Leistert, Rowman & Littlefield, 53-71.

Milmo, D. (2022, September 30th). ‘The bleakest of worlds’: how Molly Russell fell into a vortex of despair on social media. *The Guardian.*

https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/sep/30/how-molly-russell-fell-into-a-vortex-of-despair-on-social-media. Accessed 25.03.25.

Miner, M. H., Bockting, W. O., Romine, R. S., & Raman, S. (2012). Conducting internet research with the transgender population: Reaching broad samples and collecting valid data. *Social science computer review*, *30*(2), 202-211.

Myles, D., Duguay, S., & Echaiz, L. F. (2023). Mapping the social implications of platform algorithms for LGBTQ+ communities. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, *5*(4), 1-30.

Nagoshi, J. L., & Brzuzy, S. I. (2010). Transgender theory: Embodying research and practice. *Affilia*, *25*(4), 431-443.

Nominet (2022) *Digital Youth Index Report 2022.* https://digitalyouthindex.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Digital_Youth_Index_Year_2.pdf?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=Referral&utm_campaign=DYI_Report_2022&utm_content=DYI_Report_2022_referral Accessed 26.10.22.

Noone, C., Southgate, A., Ashman, A., Quinn, É., Comer, D., Shrewsbury, D., ... & McLamore, Q. (2025). Critically appraising the Cass report: methodological flaws and unsupported claims. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *25*(1), 1-18.

Oakley, A. (2017). Supporting one another: Nonbinary community building on Tumblr. In *Sex in the digital age* (pp. 101-112). Routledge.

Obermaier, M., Schmuck, D., & Saleem, M. (2023). I'll be there for you? Effects of Islamophobic online hate speech and counter speech on Muslim in-group bystanders' intention to intervene. *New Media & Society*, *25*(9), 2339-2358.

Obermaier, M. (2024). Youth on standby? Explaining adolescent and young adult bystanders' intervention against online hate speech. *New Media & Society*, *26*(8), 4785-4807.

Ofcom (2021) *Communication Market Report 2021*. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/222401/communications-market-report-2021.pdf. Accessed 09.06.22.

O'Neill, M. G. (2014). Transgender youth and YouTube videos: Self-representation and five identifiable trans youth narratives. In *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, edited by Cullen, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 34-45.

Paasonen, S., Jaaksi, V., Koivunen, A., Nikunen, K., Talvitie-Lamberg, K., & Vänskä, A. (2023). Intimate infrastructures we depend upon: Living with data. *Media Theory*, *7*(2), 285-308.

Pachankis, J. E., Clark, K. A., Burton, C. L., Hughto, J. M. W., Bränström, R., & Keene, D. E. (2020). Sex, status, competition, and exclusion: Intraminority stress from within the gay community and gay and bisexual men's mental health. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *119*(3), 713.

Paceley, M. S., Goffnett, J., Sanders, L., & Gadd-Nelson, J. (2022). “Sometimes you get married on Facebook”: The use of social media among nonmetropolitan sexual and gender minority youth. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *69*(1), 41-60.

Page, M. M. (2017). One from the vaults: Gossip, access, and trans history-telling. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, 135-46.

Page, M. M. (2024, December 16th). Shroud Waving**:** On trans death, callousness, ancestors. *Valley of the D.* Substack. https://valleyofthed.substack.com/p/shroud-waving. Accessed 08.05.25.

Pang, K. C., Giordano, S., Sood, N., & Skinner, S. R. (2021). Regret, informed decision making, and respect for autonomy of trans young people. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, *5*(9), e34-e35.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Paresh, D. & Elliott, V. (2025, January 30th). Meta Is Dismantling DEI Programs but Tells Investors It Still Wants ‘Cognitive Diversity’. *Wired Magazine*. https://www.wired.com/story/meta-2024-earnings-dei-trump/. Accessed 08.03.25.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. penguin UK.

Paul, K. (2023, October 18th). Instagram users accuse platform of censoring posts supporting Palestine. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/18/instagram-palestine-posts-censorship-accusations. Accessed 06.06.24.

Pearce, R. (2018). Trans Temporalities and Non-linear Ageing. In A. King, K. Almack, Y.-T.

Suen, & S. Westwood (Eds.), *Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans People: Minding the*

Knowledge Gaps (pp. 61–74). Routledge.

Pearce, R., Erikainen, S., & Vincent, B. (2020). TERF wars: An introduction. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(4), 677-698.

Pearce, R. (2020). A methodology for the marginalised: Surviving oppression and traumatic fieldwork in the neoliberal academy. *Sociology*, *54*(4), 806-824.

Pegoraro, R. (2023, December 16th) End of an Era: Google Groups to Drop Usenet Support. *PC Mag*. https://uk.pcmag.com/social-media/150146/end-of-an-era-google-groups-to-drop-usenet-support. Accessed 09.05.24.

Peters, T. (2016) *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones.* www.torreypeters.com/book/infect-your-friends-and-loved-ones/. Accessed 08.05.22.

Pfadenhauer, M. (2018). Introduction: the reality of social constructivism. Pfadenhauer, M., & Knoblauch, H. (Eds.) *Social constructivism as paradigm?: The legacy of the social construction of reality*. Routledge.

Phelan, P. (2003). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. Routledge.

Phillips, J.B. (2024). Laughing at Death: Facebook, the 'haha' reaction, and death coverage on local us news pages. *Popular Communication*, 22(1), 17-32.

Phipps, A. (2020). Me, not you: The trouble with mainstream feminism. In *Me, not you*. Manchester University Press.

Pickles, J. (2020). Including and involving young people (under 18's) in hate research without the consent of parents. *Qualitative Research*, *20*(1), 22-38.

Pickles, J. (2021). Sociality of hate: The transmission of victimization of LGBT+ people through social media. *International review of victimology*, *27*(3), 311-327.

Pickles, J. (2023, February 27th). Brianna Ghey: how vigils help LGBTQ+ communities grieve. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/brianna-ghey-how-vigils-help-lgbtq-communities-grieve-200657. Accessed 03.01.24.

Pidd, H. (2023, December 20th). Teenagers guilty of 'senseless' murder of transgender girl Brianna Ghey. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/20/brianna-ghey-found-guilty-murder. Accessed 05.02.25.

Ping, K., Hawdon, J., & Rho, E. (2024). Perceiving and countering hate: The role of identity in online responses. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2411.01675*.

Platero, L. R., Tortajada, I., & Willem, C. (2025). Trans Girls' Activism on YouTube and Instagram. *Girls Take Action: Activism Networks by, for, and with Girls and Young Women*, *8*.

Plett, C. (2023). *On Community*. Biblioasis. Ontario, Canada.

Price, M., Legrand, A. C., Brier, Z. M., van Stolk-Cooke, K., Peck, K., Dodds, P. S., ... & Adams, Z. W. (2022). Doomscrolling during COVID-19: The negative association between daily social and traditional media consumption and mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*.

Puckett, J. A., Glozier, K., Kimball, D., & Giffel, R. (2021). A systematic review of sexuality measurement in transgender and gender diverse populations. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *8*(3), 276.

Raun, T. (2015). Video blogging as a vehicle of transformation: Exploring the intersection between trans identity and information technology. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *18*(3), 365-378.

Rawson, K. J. (2014). Transgender worldmaking in cyberspace: Historical activism on the internet. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *1*(2), 38-60.

Reaidi, J. & Gamble, J. (2024, April 3rd). Trans teen said before death he will be happy in afterlife. *Islington Gazette.* https://www.islingtongazette.co.uk/news/24228351.trans-teen-said-death-will-happy-afterlife/ Accessed 05.02.25.

Reed, E. (2023) "Senator Admits "Kids Online Safety Act" Will Target Trans Content Online" *Erin in the Morning*, Substack. https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/senator-admits-kids-online-safety?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=994764&post_id=136690186&isFreemail=true&utm_medium=email. Accessed 04.09.23.

Reisner, S. L., Randazzo, R. K., White Hughto, J. M., Peitzmeier, S., DuBois, L. Z., Pardee, D. J., Marrow, E., McLean, S. & Potter, J. (2018). Sensitive health topics with underserved patient populations: Methodological considerations for online focus group discussions. *Qualitative Health Research, 28*(10), 1658-1673.

RESIST Project Team. (2024). *The RESIST Project Report. National and Transnational Reports on the Formation of Anti-Gender Politics.* https://theresistproject.eu/sdc_download/561/?key=tagmqaqrdtg7ouma0e1weisf36ftqg. Accessed 04.02.25.

Robinson, B. A. (2022). Non-binary embodiment, queer knowledge production, and disrupting the Cisnormative field: Notes from a trans ethnographer. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *30*(3), 425-445.

Rodríguez-de-Dios, I., & Soto-Sanfiel, M. T. (2024). Reducing transphobia with the narratives of transgender YouTubers. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *18*(5).

Ronzhyn, A., Cardenal, A. S., & Batlle Rubio, A. (2023). Defining affordances in social media research: A literature review. *New Media & Society*, *25*(11), 3165-3188.

Rothbaum, B., Etengoff, C., & Uribe, E. (2022). Transgender community resilience on YouTube: Constructing an informational, emotional, and sociorelational support exchange. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *50*(5), 2366-2384.

Rouvroy, A. (2011) "Technology, Virtuality and Utopia: Governmentality in an Age of Autonomic Computing." In *The Philosophy of Law Meets the Philosophy of Technology: Autonomic Computing and Transformations of Human Agency*, ed. Mireille Hildebrandt and Antoinette Rouvroy, 136–157. Milton Park, UK: Routledge.

Rowling, J.K. [@jk_rowling]. (2024, December 28th). *There are no trans kids. No child is 'born in the wrong body'. There are only adults like you, prepared*...[image attached][Post]. X. https://archive.ph/VboGv#selection-471.0-471.263. Accessed 07.02.25.

Ruokonen-Engler, M. K., & Siouti, I. (2016). Biographical entanglements, self-reflexivity, and transnational knowledge production. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *22*(9), 745-752.

Russell, L. (2020) *Glitch Feminism: a manifesto*. Verso Books.

Ryan, T. J. (2012). What makes us click? Demonstrating incentives for angry discourse with digital-age field experiments. *The Journal of Politics*, *74*(4), 1138-1152.

Sætra, H. S., & Ese, J. (2023). Shinigami eyes and social media labeling as a technology for self-care. In Sætra, H. S. (ed), *Technology and sustainble development: The promise and pittfals of techno-solutionism*. New York: Routledge. 53-69.

Salisbury, L. (2023). On not being able to read: doomscrolling and anxiety in pandemic times. *Textual practice*, *37*(6), 887-918.

Sampson, T., Maddison, S., & Ellis, D. (Eds.). (2018). "Introduction: On Affect, Social Media and Criticality" in *Affect and social media: Emotion, mediation, anxiety and contagion*. Rowman & Littlefield, 20-37.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., and Thornhill, A. (2019). Research Methods for Business Students. 8th Edn. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Savolainen, L. (2022) "The Shadow Banning Controversy: Perceived Governance and Algorithmic Folklore." *Media, Culture, & Society,* 44(6), 1091-1109. DOI: 10.1177/01634437221077174.

Scheuerman, M. K., Branham, S. M., & Hamidi, F. (2018). Safe spaces and safe places: Unpacking technology-mediated experiences of safety and harm with transgender people. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-computer Interaction*, *2*(CSCW), 1-27.

Schiappa, E., Gregg, P. B., & Hewes, D. E. (2005). The parasocial contact hypothesis. *Communication monographs*, *72*(1), 92-115.

Schudson, Z., & van Anders, S. (2019). 'You have to coin new things': sexual and gender identity discourses in asexual, queer, and/or trans young people's networked counterpublics. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *10*(4), 354-368.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1997). Paranoid reading and reparative reading; or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you. *Novel gazing: Queer readings in fiction*, 1-37.

Selkie, E., Adkins, V., Masters, E., Bajpai, A., & Shumer, D. (2020). Transgender adolescents' uses of social media for social support. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *66*(3), 275-280.

Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Hachette UK.

Shapiro, E. (2004). 'Trans' cending barriers: Transgender organizing on the internet. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *16*(3-4), 165-179.

Sharma, S. (2013). Black Twitter? Racial hashtags, networks and contagion. *New formations*, *78*(78), 46-64.

Sharma, B., Lee, S. S., & Johnson, B. K. (2022). The dark at the end of the tunnel: Doomscrolling on social media newsfeeds.

Sherwood, H. & Stewart, H. (2022, April 1st). Conversion practices U-turns 'set Tories back 25 years' with LGBT+ community. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/conversion-practices-u-turns-set-tories-back-25-years-with-lgbt-community. Accessed 07.02.25.

Shook, A. G., Tordoff, D. M., Clark, A., Hardwick, R., St. Pierre Nelson, W., & Kantrowitz-Gordon, I. (2024). Age, autonomy, and authority of knowledge: discursive constructions of youth decision-making capacity and parental support in transgender Minors' accounts of healthcare access. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *39*(1), 104-132.

Siddique, H. (2021, June 10th). Gender-critical views are a protected belief, appeal tribunal rules. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/jun/10/gender-critical-views-protected-belief-appeal-tribunal-rules-maya-forstater. Accessed 05.02.25.

Siebers, Tobin. (2008). *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Simpson, E., & Semaan, B. (2021). For You, or For "You"? Everyday LGBTQ+ Encounters with TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction*, *4*(CSCW3), 1-34.

Simms, D. (2020). Peer responses to trans youth tweeting about self-harm and suicidality. *Creative nursing*, *26*(2), 135-142.

Sinclair-Palm, J., & Chokly, K. (2023). 'It'sa giant faux pas': exploring young trans people's beliefs about deadnaming and the term deadname. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *20*(2), 370-389.

Skelton, K. R., Evans, R., LaChenaye, J., Amsbary, J., Wingate, M., & Talbott, L. (2018). Exploring social media group use among breastfeeding mothers: Qualitative analysis. *JMIR pediatrics and parenting*, *1*(2), e11344.

Smith, V. (2021). Detangling Online Dystopias: Emotional Reflexivity and Cyber-Deviance. In Mckenzie, J. & Patulny. R. (eds), *Dystopian Emotions* (pp. 53-70). Bristol University Press.

Snorton, C. R., & Haritaworn, J. (2013). Trans necropolitics: A transnational reflection on violence, death, and the trans of color afterlife. In *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix* (pp. 305-316). Routledge.

Souris, R. N. (2024). "The Cruelty is the Point": Virtue Ethics and Immigration. *Polity*, *56*(3), 434-455.

Squires, L., Laws, A., Joubert, H. E., & Greenhill, B. (2024). "Grasping on a spider web of hope": Psychological challenges and impact of waiting to access UK gender dysphoria Clinics on young adults. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1-20.

Stark, L. (2018) "Visceral Data" in Sampson, T., Maddison, S., & Ellis, D. (Eds.). *Affect and social media: Emotion, mediation, anxiety and contagion*. Rowman & Littlefield, 48-57.

Steadman, S. (2021). " That Name Is Dead to Me": Reforming Name Change Laws to Protect Transgender and Nonbinary Youth. *U. Mich. JL Reform*, *55*, 1.

Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press.

Stewart, D. W. & Shamdasani, P. (2017) Online Focus Groups, *Journal of Advertising*, 46:1, 48-60.

Stonewall (2021) *Stonewall Response: Online Safety and Online Harms Inquiry.*

UK Parliament. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/38523/pdf/. Accessed 05.09.23.

Strimpel, Z. (2025, March 23rd). Even Oxford University has bowed to the cult of gender ideology. *The Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/03/23/even-oxford-university-has-bowed-to-the-cult-of-gender-ideo/. Accessed 06.04.25.

Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender history: The roots of today's revolution*. Hachette UK.

Smyth, M. (2024, April 8th). Charlie Millers inquest: Son's mental health support was a mess – mum. BBC News. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-68759954. Accessed 05.02.25.

Sutherland, D. K. (2021). “Trans Enough”: Examining the Boundaries of Transgender-Identity Membership. *Social Problems*.

Sun, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2021). A review of theories and models applied in studies of social media addiction and implications for future research. *Addictive behaviors*, *114*, 106699.

Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

Talbot, C. V., Talbot, A., Roe, D. J., & Briggs, P. (2020). The management of LGBTQ+ identities on social media: A student perspective. *new media & society*, 1461444820981009.

Tankersley, A. P., Grafsky, E. L., Dike, J., & Jones, R. T. (2021). Risk and resilience factors for mental health among transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) youth: A systematic review. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *24*(2), 183-206.

Taylor, J. (2023, September 9th). Bots on X worse than ever according to analysis of 1m tweets during first Republican primary debate. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/09/x-twitter-bots-republican-primary-debate-tweets-increase. Accessed 07.04.25.

Thomas, T. (2024, 18th October). Chalmers GIC pauses all gender surgery referrals for under 25s, cites Cass review. *Trans Safety network*. https://transsafety.network/posts/chalmers-gic-pauses-gender-surgery-referrals-under-25s-cass-review/. Accessed 23.10.24.

Thomas, K., Akhawe, D., Bailey, M., Boneh, D., Bursztein, E., Consolvo, S., ... & Stringhini, G. (2021, May). Sok: Hate, harassment, and the changing landscape of online abuse. In *2021 IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy (SP)* (pp. 247-267). IEEE.

Todd, J. D. (2023). Exhaustion, exhausting temporalities, and young trans people’s everyday lives in the UK. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *113*(3), 771-789.

Tortajada, I., Willem, C., Platero Mendez, R. L., & Araüna, N. (2021). Lost in transition? Digital trans activism on Youtube. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(8), 1091-1107.

Trans kids Deserve better (2024) *Press Releases*. Accessed 23.10.24: https://transkidsdeservebetter.org/press

Trott, V. (2021). Networked feminism: Counterpublics and the intersectional issues of # MeToo. *Feminist Media Studies*, *21*(7), 1125-1142.

Trussell, D. E., Apgar, J., & Kovac, L. (2018). Online qualitative methods: Confronting new possibilities and challenges within a social justice perspective. In *Digital dilemmas: Transforming gender identities and power relations in everyday life* (pp. 75-94). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Turner, C. (2024). The transgender space invader: Out of time and out of affect. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13675494241265609.

UNICEF UK. (1989). *The United Nations convention on the rights of the child.* https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-

content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf?_ga=2.78590034.795419542.1582474737-1972578648.1582474737. Accessed 08.05.25.

Van Gennep, A. (2019). *The rites of passage*. University of Chicago press.

Van Houtven, E., Acquah, S. B., Obermaier, M., Saleem, M., & Schmuck, D. (2024). 'You Got My Back?'Severity and Counter-Speech in Online Hate Speech Toward Minority Groups. *Media Psychology*, *27*(6), 923-954.

Villegas, D. (2018). From the self to the screen: A journey guide for auto-netnography in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *34*(3-4), 243-262.

Vincent, B. W. (2018). Studying trans: Recommendations for ethical recruitment and collaboration with transgender participants in academic research. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *9*(2), 102-116.

Vukmirović, S., Perković, L. C., & Kovač, D. (2012). Discussion groups in interactive online education. In *2012 Proceedings of the 35th International Convention MIPRO* (pp. 1422-1427). IEEE.

Wakefield, L. (2022, 5th June). Trans community breathes sigh of relief as Supreme Court rejects puberty blockers case. *Pink News.* https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2022/05/06/keira-bell-tavistock-supreme-court-puberty-blockers/. Accessed 26.10.22.

Walker, P. (2025, March 20th) UK data recording of biological sex causing potential risks, report finds. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/20/uk-data-recording-biological-sex-gender-identity-report. Accessed 10.04.25.

Walters, M. A., Paterson, J. L., McDonnell, L., & Brown, R. (2020). Group identity, empathy and shared suffering: Understanding the 'community' impacts of anti-LGBT and Islamophobic hate crimes. *International Review of Victimology*, *26*(2), 143-162.

Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. Princeton University Press.

Weale, S. (2025, March 26th). University of Sussex fine sparks fears of bigger penalties for other institutions. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/26/institutions-fear-bigger-penalties-after-landmark-university-of-sussex-fine. Accessed 10.04.25.

Westbrook, L. (2020) Unlivable Lives: violence and Identity in transgender activism. University of California Press.

Whannel, G. (2010). News, celebrity, and vortextuality: A study of the media coverage of the Michael Jackson verdict. Cultural Politics, 6(1), 65–84.
Whittle, S. (1998). The trans-cyberian mail way. *Social & Legal Studies*, *7*(3), 389-408.

Wiggins, T. (2021). Listening for Trans Childism in Discursive Concern. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 1-7.

Wilf, S., & Wray-Lake, L. (2021). "That's How Revolutions Happen": Psychopolitical Resistance in Youth's Online Civic Engagement. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 07435584211062121.

Wilson, R. A., & Land, M. K. (2020). Hate speech on social media: Content moderation in context. *Conn. L. Rev.*, *52*, 1029.

Winberry, J., & Gray, L. (2022, October). From “Mesearch” to “Wesearch”: The Role of Community in Developing Identity-Centric Research. In *Proceedings of the ALISE Annual Conference*.

Winter, C., & Gundur, R. V. (2024). Challenges in gaining ethical approval for sensitive digital social science studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *27*(1), 31-46.

Young, T. (2018). Invisibility and power in the digital age: Issues for feminist and queer narratology. *Textual Practice*, *32*(6), 991-1006.

Zayapragassarazan, Z. (2020). COVID-19: Strategies for online engagement of remote learners. *F1000Research*, 9(246), 246.

Zhang, Y., Luo, C., Wang, H., Chen, Y., & Chen, Y. (2023). ‘A right to be forgotten’: retrospective privacy concerns in social networking services. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, *42*(7), 829-850.

Zhang, Z., Zhao, J., Wang, G., Johnston, S. K., Chalhoub, G., Ross, T., ... & Shadbolt, N. (2024). Trouble in Paradise? Understanding Mastodon Admin's Motivations, Experiences, and Challenges Running Decentralised Social Media. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *8*(CSCW2), 1-24.

Zwaanswijk, M., & Dulmen, S. v. (2014). Advantages of asynchronous online focus groups and face-to-face focus groups as perceived by child, adolescent and adult participants: A survey study. *BMC Research Notes, 7*(1), 756.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Ethical approval

Title of research study	Ethics review reference	Approval date	Thesis chapter
Online Communities and Counterpublics: How Trans Youth Negotiate Social Media	ER43021142	31.01.2023 amendment 14.04.2023	Methodology: Ethics p.81

Appendix 2. AOFG welcome and code of conduct post

Welcome and Code of Conduct

A video walkthrough of the below can be found here: Redacted

How the group works:

Every day there will be 2 discussion prompts for you to engage with and discuss with each other.

I will also chip in with some questions to delve a bit deeper into things you may post but **you are under no obligation to answer any questions from me or other participants that you are not comfortable with.** Only share what you are happy to.

The prompts are just that, topics to build around- go where the discussion takes you.

In addition to typed contributions, you are more than welcome to illustrate your points with links and images- **as long as they comply with the below code of conduct**.

For your safety and security, every post will be moderated before posting - this means that while you can send posts at any time, new posts will only appear based on moderator availability and capacity: generally between 9am and 9pm.

Quick Escape – the name of this group and the conversation titles are intentionally vague in case you are disturbed in your environment by someone you would not want to know you are taking part in this research. You may also want to keep another tab open on a neutral page that you can click to if you need to take this group off the screen quickly. If you need further support regarding an unsafe environment, please see the "Resources" post.

If you contribute posts to discussions on at least one prompt *and* reply to at least one other participant every day for the 3 days, you will receive a £20 gift voucher once the group has concluded – sent to the email address you have supplied to me.

When I send you your gift voucher I will also ask if you have any reflections on the experience of taking part in this project – this is optional.

If, after the group has concluded, you change your mind and do not want your data included in the final analysis, **you have 2 weeks after the final day of the group to contact me and request that your data be deleted**, this will be respected.

2 weeks after the group concludes I will delete your email addresses from my database, after which I will not be able to link your identity to your group contributions. This is to ensure your privacy; however, my university email address will remain the same and you are welcome to reach out with any future thoughts or reflections on the project if you wish.

Code of Conduct:

Do not post personally identifiable information about yourself, or anyone who is not a public figure. No links or usernames of your personal social media profiles.

Your participation in this project is anonymous, and you should remain anonymous to each other. This is for your safety. Trans people are a small demographic - this means it can often take a lot less additional information to identify us than our cisgender peers.

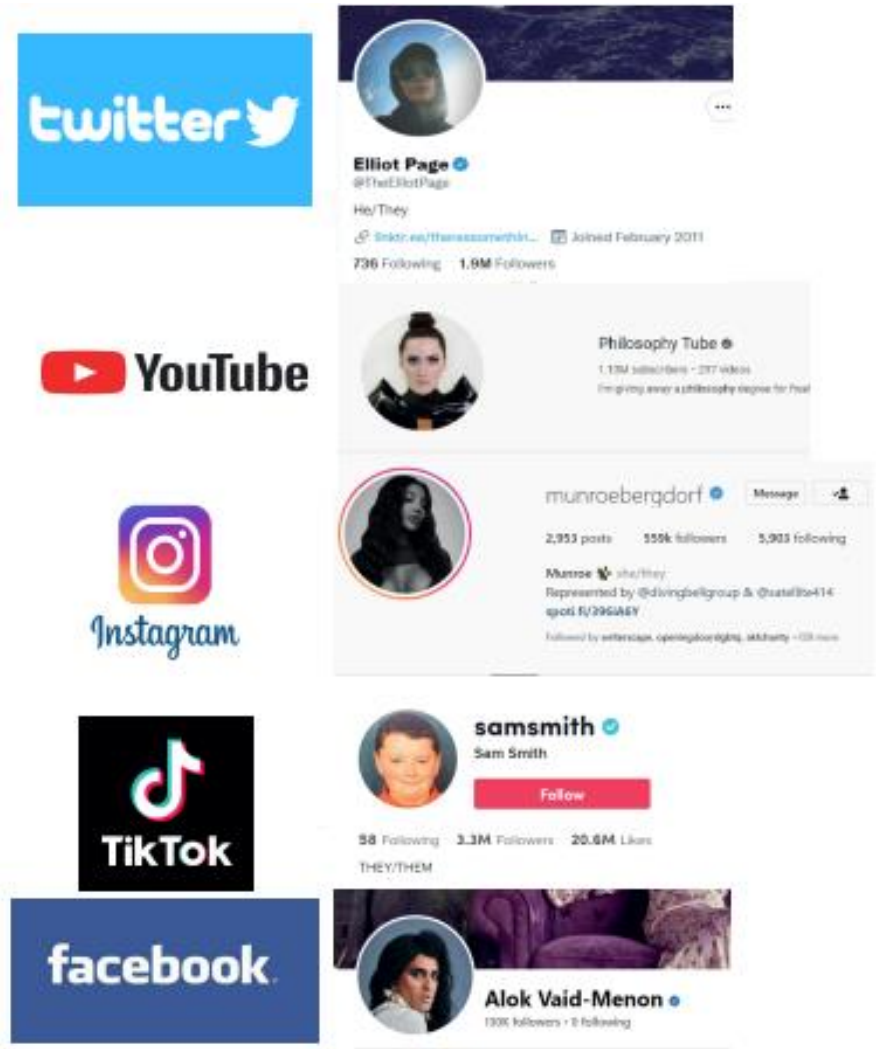
Little details can add up, if you mention your hometown in one post and a company you work for in another - it would be easy for someone to identify you, so keep it vague e.g. "I live in the north east and work at a university" would be allowed but "I live in Sheffield and work at Hallam University" would not.

The same goes for images – no photos of people who aren't public figures, or places that make you or others identifiable – **but if you want to illustrate points with images of publicly available memes, cartoons, your own doodles etc, this is more than welcome.**

If a post is assessed to contain personally identifiable information, that post will not make it past moderation and I will message the group member asking them to rephrase their post.

If you want to post about other people's public social media content, the same rules apply, i.e., **paraphrase and anonymise**, unless they are a public figure.

You can post links to, or images of, posts by public figures: A public figure here is defined as anyone who has a verified account on one of the major social media platforms.
Every platform signifies a verified account with a tick in a circle next to the username. Examples**:**



(Note: due to the frequently changing nature of Twitter verification, this is the least favoured platform for judging public figure status and will be assessed case-by-case at moderation point)

Wider Confidentiality

Do not screenshot, copy or otherwise leak the content of this group. Some group members may want to share experiences they would not want to reach a wider audience out of context. Any member found to be leaking the content of the group to other platforms will be removed from the group, their data deleted, and will not receive a gift card for their contribution.

No discriminatory comments, abusive speech, or sexual content of any kind.

Any such comments will not make it past moderation, you will receive a message from me explaining why the post has not been allowed, if

you have made a mistake in good faith, you will be permitted to submit a rephrasing of your post. Unambiguous attempts at hateful or abusive posts will see the member removed from the group. As above, in the event that someone is removed from the group for misconduct: all of their data will be removed from the project, and they will not receive a gift card for their contribution.

If you are quoting/describing abuse that has been aimed at you, this will be permitted with appropriate redactions and content notes to keep other members safe.

Content Notes

Everyone has their own sensitivities and many people have experienced specific traumas that make some topics particularly distressing. Please include a content note (CN) at the top of **every post** that has potentially upsetting content, to empower other members to look after themselves. Please see below for an example of a CN being used.

Colour Redactions
If you are recounting abusive speech you have been targeted with or witnessed being experienced by others online, it may be appropriate for you to quote slurs or violent language. If this is the case, CN that the post will include this type of language and change the colour setting of the font to white for the abusive words themselves, leaving quote marks in black around it.
In addition, leave several lines with full stops after CNs.
This way participants can still access your full post if they wish, or avoid that detail if they do not feel in a position to read that at that time.
Here is an example of a post that will pass moderation in this way:

“CN: ableism, suicide
.
.
.

I used to post HRT progress photos on main but I kept getting comments telling me I was “ ” so now I only post them on my locked”

Boundaries

This is a small, brief, focus group for research purposes, it is not intended to provide emotional or therapeutic support. You are welcome, and encouraged, to respond empathetically to each other, but if you are in need of help and support, please see the “Resources” post in this group, where you will find a list of organisations who can provide free and specialist support.

Please comment below stating that you have read and agree to the above.